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ARGOSY

WEEKLY

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This magazine is on sale every Wednesday

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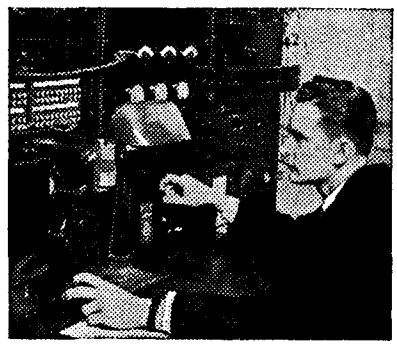

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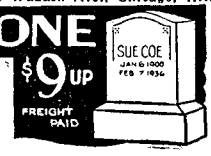

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30x5.00-20	2.85	1.25
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28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
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5.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
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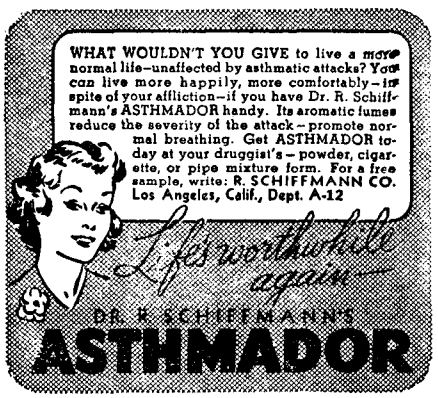
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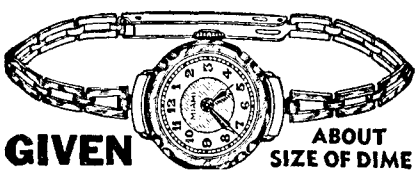

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CHAPTER I

CAVALIER'S DOWNFALL

THE man was rash. Entirely too rash for duty at the Louvre. He refused to recognize the diplomacy demanded of an officer in the Queen's Guard despite de Guitaut's repeated lectures about it.

De Guitaut eyed him now, in the precise confines of his quarters, and shook his head. This slim malefactor of the court's etiquette; this exiled Englishman who bore the title of Lord Richard Cleve with such amiability, had to be reprimanded.

He had to be chastised in a manner which would show him the error of taking a young peer of France by the ear, and leading him from a Paris pot-house while onlookers howled in merriment.

The *capitaine* shrugged. To make a reprimand stick to this smiling iconoclast was a poser. Richard Cleve seemed born for trouble and verbal punishment had lost potency through overuse. De Guitaut tugged his spade-beard, scowled.

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The Englishman fought alone—until D'Entreville arrived

"Of course you realize, Lieutenant," he said, "last night's affair will cause me embarrassment. I am responsible for the conduct of my officers. La Duchesse d'Argonne does not take kindly to being made a laughing-stock. Her son's prestige is important, and she is very close to Her Majesty's ear!"

Cleve shrugged. There was grace in the way his broad shoulders moved. He rested a lean hand on his sword-hilt and used the other to brush back a strand of unruly chestnut hair.

"The Duchess asked me to save her wandering son from the evils of Paris," he said smilingly. "And I did."

De Guitaut snorted. "You made a fool of him!"

"That's impossible."

The *capitaine* choked. He glared at his junior officer. Richard Cleve reminded him of his younger days. The Englishman had the same gay restlessness in his eye; the same devil-may-care manner of dressing.

The black doublet he wore was slashed with silver. His short maroon military cape was faced with *fleur de lis,* and his thigh-high cordovan boots encased his legs without a crease.

Gallant! Rakish! But a devil for trouble, nevertheless. The *capitaine* threw up his hands.

"Sangodemi!" he exploded. "I despair of you! But for that cursed wild streak, you'd be perfect. Mark your past actions, *monsieur:* Last week, three duels. Yesterday, two Cardinal's guards thrown into a fountain. Last night, a fool made of a nobleman!"

Cleve looked uncomfortable. Until now those adventures had seemed fun. He picked up his hat with its scarlet plume and inspected it intently.

"Sorry," he said looking up. "I joined the Guard for action, *Capitaine.* I'm not made for court life. Social hypocrisy stifles me. There is something in my nature that prevents me fawning for favors from fops and courtiers."

He eyed his *commandante* obliquely. "Perchance," he continued hopefully, "another regiment such as the . . ."

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But de Guitaut was already shaking his grizzled head. The court was rife with rumors of war and civil war. Cardinal Richelieu's latest coup d'état had sparked new jealousy amongst the nobility. Richard Cleve might be an irrepressible madcap, but he was also a fine soldier. A leader. And the *capitaine* wanted to keep him in the troop.

"No!" he said flatly. "If this is another request for a transfer to the King's Horse, I refuse in advance."

"Oh." The young officer hesitated. "I was afraid of that." Then the slow smile, typical of him, crept across his lean bronzed features. "But what of the Duchess, *monsieur?*"

De Guitaut scratched his chin and paced the length of the room. "A month's suspension without pay should placate her," he decided. "Yes. A month without pay."

Cleve nodded. He had seen little of France since his arrival from England. Here was an opportunity. "Why, that is excellent, *mon Capitaine,*" he agreed. "I really need a vacation, you know. Been getting stuffy, here at the palace."

De Guitaut collapsed into a chair. He made a hopeless gesture. "There it is," he muttered to himself. "I punish him, and he turns it into a holiday!" Suddenly he got to his feet. "*Corbac,*" he roared. "Get out! Get out of here before I lose my patience!"

OUTSIDE the *capitaine's* room Cleve paused, adjusted his hat, and blew out his cheeks. "Hmmmm. The old boy is getting touchy!" he muttered, and strode off down the long hallway.

The remark was typical. Cleve had never learned the penalty of an irresponsible tongue or an impulsive act. The trouble he found himself constantly embroiled in came for the most part as a complete surprise. His intentions were honest, but opinionated. They were the reason for his present exile.

Two months ago he had been home, secure in the luxury of the English peerage. And then he had said the wrong things about Buckingham, the King's favorite. And Buckingham had seen to it that he left England before he had had a chance to prove them. Personally, Cleve considered the whole affair unwarranted.

Outside the Louvre it was a beautiful morning. Blue and gold, with sunshine sweeping the Capitainerie and glinting on the green-yellow waters of the Seine. Stepping into the warmth of it, Cleve decided to walk. The sun was too pleasant to waste.

There was a tavern, L'Oiseau Blue on the other side of town, so he bent his course in that direction.

The Quai de l'École was quiet as he passed, somnolent in the spring warmth. He loitered through the market at the foot of the Pont Neuf because the booths, with their variety of merchandise—great slabs of gory meat to the finest examples of metal work—fascinated him.

He paused to watch a group of tumblers do their act; threw them a coin and continued his way.

Rounding the corner which led to the tavern, he was greeted by the sight of a small crowd. A heaving, yelling, cursing crowd, gripped in the spirit of combat. The nucleus of the fray was clotted around the tavern's door. Cleve approached slowly, his fingers caressing the steel of his rapier.

He stood at the fringe and glanced curiously in the direction of the entrance. He weighed his chances of reaching it, and decided that the passage would be too rough. Not worth a bottle of *sacque.*

"Well, there are other inns." He shrugged, and started to leave. Splattering out of the fracas came a large gob of mud. It struck his shoulder and streaked upward, dirtying his cheek.

He removed the grime and turned slowly. Ten feet away was a little man standing in the attitude of a discus-thrower after the throw. The man stared uncertainly, and Cleve wagged a reprimanding finger.

"Ah, you want to play, eh?" he asked advancing.

The little man seemed hypnotized at first by what he'd done; then he let out a howl and scuttled into the mob. The cavalier

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hitched up his rapier and plunged after him. Somebody stuck out a foot and he found himself sprawled on the ground.

"By Gad, that settles it," he muttered, getting to his feet. With the righteous indignation of an aroused neutral, he drew his blade and slapped the flat of it across an exposed rear. "Disperse you brawlers! Disperse!"

He waded in, his blade whistling as he spanked right and left. "Come gentlemen," he laughed. "Let's have order. Disperse and go home! Disperse!"

The mob was quick to understand. It felt the cavalier's smarting blade; heard his yelled command. Some spotted the *fleur de lis* on his cape, and sent up the cry: "Run! The Guard has come! Run! Run!"

THE crowd scattered like marbles. There was still a knot of four struggling inside the tavern. Cleve sheathed his blade and stepped through the door.

He took the first by the scruff of the neck, and sent him bowling into the street. A second followed. The third left quickly of his own accord; but as the Englishman seized the fourth, the fellow objected.

"*Mais non, m'sieu.* I am the proprietor!"

Cleve noted the rolled-up sleeves; the apron. He released the man with a laugh. "*Pecaire, m'sieu le maitre,* you have remarkable entertainment at your tavern. I enjoyed it, but it has given me a thirst. Fetch me a bottle of wine, eh?"

"*Mais oui, m'sieu le grand,*" said the inn-keeper, hastening to obey. "For you I fetch the very best in my cellar. One moment, *m'sieu.*"

Cleve found an overturned table and righted it. He discovered a chair and was about to sit down when his eye caught a portion of the floor near the entrance. There was a long shadow stretched across it. He looked up.

In the door-frame, with a bared sword slanted across his boots, stood the resplendent figure of a Cardinal Guards officer. Behind him were his men. A squad of eight, standing at ease in the bright sunshine of the street.

Cleve's hand which had instinctively dropped to his hilt fell away, and he laughed. "Egad! To the rescue come the Cardinal's brave men. But, late as usual." He bowed mockingly. "Pray enter, monsieur. It is quite safe—now."

The newcomer frowned, sheathed his sword, and stepped into the taproom. His flashing dark eyes swept the wreckage. He didn't speak for a moment, but stood arms akimbo as if undecided.

"A small war, no doubt," he finally muttered to himself, and turned to the Englishman. "All right, *monsieur.* What was the cause of this?"

Cleve's jaw tightened. There was a stiff authority in the other's voice which didn't quite suit his taste. He sat down leisurely. "A high wind, *monsieur,*" he said pleasantly. "A tornado."

The Cardinalist didn't consider it funny. "Who are you?"

"Richard Cleve, of Her Majesty's Guards. I have the situation well in control. You may run on back to your master and tell him that."

The officer pierced the speaker with a glance. "Ah," he grated, "a clown, from a regiment of clowns." He stared at Cleve with sudden decision in his eyes. "A man with your sense of comedy would naturally start something like this. Where is the proprietor?"

"Below. In the cellar. Shall I fetch him?"

"And escape? Oh no! You're under arrest, *monsieur.*"

Cleve stood up. He kicked the chair aside so that he could have room. "What?"

The Cardinalist beckoned and the squad poured into the inn. "I said," he repeated. "You are under arrest."

Cleve eyed the guards. His sword seemed to leap from its sheath. "Well"—he laughed—"the odds are about even. Come and take me!"

The Cardinalist shrugged. He turned to his men. "My pleasure," he warned. "Don't interfere." With great calmness he drew his blade. His even lips beneath the clipped mustache verged on a smile. "I'm coming for you, clown. *En garde!*"

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Cleve laughed. He crouched; dropped a foot back for balance. The heel came down heavily on the neck of a bottle; and then things began to happen. His feet shot up; his sword flew one way and his hat another. He landed with a soul-jarring crash.

"Ooff!"

The Cardinalist howled. He sheathed his blade and assisted the Englishman to his feet. "My quickest capture, *monsieur,"* he chuckled. "Consider yourself arrested!"

Cleve glared, then hobbled two steps forward. The floor hadn't been soft. " 'Tis considered," he accorded wryly. "A downfall both figurative and literal."

"Shall I have the men carry you?"

"I'll walk," Cleve said. "Lead on."

CHAPTER II

OUT CLAWS, KITTEN!

DURING the march to the Palais de Richelieu, Cleve studied his captor. The man's bearing was soldierly, the cheekbones high, the nose aristocratic, the mouth personable.

He was taller than Cleve by two inches, and if he hadn't such an air of self-sufficiency the Englishman felt that he would be likeable.

This trait annoyed Cleve. Then he smiled considering how this smug martinet would look when he discovered that he had arrested the wrong man. Cleve was counting on the keeper of L'Oiseau Bleu to aid him.

His thoughts were interrupted as the squad tramped through the main gate of the Cardinal's palace. The building was magnificent, a true proclamation of Richelieu's power: for it far exceeded the Louvre in beauty and size.

The captive stared; then nodded agreeably. The Cardinal was very wise. Having incurred Louis XIII's jealousy by building this edifice, he had soothed the pangs by giving it to the Crown—after his death, of course.

Cleve smiled. "Very pretty quarters," he said to the Cardinalist.

The other nodded pleasantly. "Glad you like them, *monsieur,"* he said. "I trust the dungeon will meet with your approval, also."

They went deep into the bowels of the palace where the light was grey and the air damp. The smell of mould was heavy. Walking through the grim atmosphere Cleve wondered whether he hadn't bit off more than he could chew. The Cardinalist ushered him into a dismal little room and smiled charmingly.

"Fine view," he said, indicating the blank wall. "Well heated and cosy. Of course, I must apologize for the slight leak in the roof. But we can't have everything, can we?"

Cleve looked at his uncomfortable surroundings. The grin on his captor's face suddenly irked him, and he lost his sense of humor. "No," he said in a strangled voice. "*We* can't."

The Cardinalist pursed his lips. He stepped out of the cell and locked the door. *"Au revoir, mon ami.* I trust that your sense of comedy will make you comfortable."

The Englishman stood spread-legged in the center of the cell, now thoroughly aroused. "I trust yours will, when I get out of here!" he roared. "You'll need it."

AN HOUR crawled into the gloom. Cleve paced and cursed and thought up tortures. Finally a bearded guardsman came and opened the cell.

He led Cleve silently up the grimy stone steps into a reception hall, then down a corridor to a gilded anteroom carpeted in red. There was a set of high-paneled doors at one side.

"Monseigneur le Cardinal will see you presently, m'lord," the guard said, and withdrew.

Alone in the large room Cleve grew thoughtful. He had a distinct sense of impending adventure. He was not being treated as a prisoner, but rather as a guest. And then too, the guard had used his English title. With a frown, the Englishman shrugged and waited.

Shortly, there was the firm tread of foot-

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steps approaching the other side of the paneled doors. He straightened as they swung back to reveal a bearded figure on the threshold.

The newcomer was garbed in a monk's habit which somehow added to his height and lent dignity to his years. Cleve recognised the man immediately. This was Père Joseph, Richelieu's only true friend, his only confidant.

The monk nodded. His voice had a soft timbre which fell pleasantly.

"*Monseigneur* will see you now, m'lord."

He ushered Cleve into a vast library heavy with furnishings and an atmosphere of thought. Except for the two patterned shafts of sunlight cast through the latticed windows, it was almost dark. At the end, behind a heavy Venetian desk, sat Richelieu.

The Cardinal's fine pallor was delicately tinted with shadow, giving his sharply chiseled features a thoughtful, profound, nearly ethereal appearance. He was leaning forward over the desk and speaking in sharp tones to a young man standing before him.

Cleve recognized the officer who had arrested him, and he grinned with impish glee.

". . . and from the testimony of the proprietor," Richelieu was saying, "your patrol was fifteen minutes late in answering his call for aid. Furthermore, Capitaine Cordeau assures me that you were spending that time finishing one of your silly poems. Monsieur d'Entreville, I'll not tolerate such inefficiency!"

The stern reprimand ended as Cleve and Père Joseph came up. The Cardinalist officer, d'Entreville, glanced out of the corner of his eye, saw the Englishman and flushed.

"Rather warm isn't it, *mon ami?*" Cleve greeted him out of the corner of his mouth.

D'Entreville didn't say anything but there was murder in his dark eyes. Cleve chuckled happily. And then Richelieu looked up and pinned him with cold black eyes. The happy chuckle died away.

"And here we have the man who did d'Entreville's work for him," said Richelieu. "I have long desired to meet you, my lord Cleve. *Mais oui.* Your *commandante* tells such interesting things of you."

The speaker rose. He made a graceful figure in his trailing red robe, seeming taller than he was by virtue of his slenderness. There was an authoritative crack to his words which revealed the man's dynamic personality.

Here was a ruler. A molder of destiny. He paced to the side of the room now, turned with a lithe panther-like movement, and fixed Cleve again with his eyes.

"There is a little matter of two Cardinal's guards and a fountain that needs explaining, Monsieur Cleve," he said, and returned to the desk. "Also a few illegal duels."

The Englishman looked for his glib tongue and couldn't find it. "Oh I—I—that is, *Monseigneur . . .*"

The Cardinal made a peremptory gesture. "Don't waste my time in inventing excuses. You're a rascal, and you know it!" He looked up and caught d'Entreville wearing a crooked smile. "Ah. It amuses you, *monsieur le comte?*"

The Frenchman shifted uneasily. "Eh—no, *Monseigneur,*" he replied.

A SILENCE fell. Finally Richelieu sat down. He shrugged and interlaced his long tapering fingers. "Two of the wildest young rogues in Paris," he said ruefully to Père Joseph.

Then he directed a thoughtful glance in Cleve's direction. "Your arrest was a fortunate error, *monsieur.* It saves me the trouble of sending for you."

"Sending for me, *Monseigneur?*"

"Yes. One of the guards whom you pitched into the fountain has developed a cold. Poetic justice, *monsieur,* for you shall take his place. You are transferred to my guards, m'lord. Not only that—you are about to be sent on your first mission. I have notified your *commandante.*"

Cleve saw his month of freedom flying out of the window. He'd wanted that month. Besides, he had small heart for running any of the Cardinal's errands.

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"But—but *Monseigneur,*" he protested. "You said yourself that I was a rascal. Surely, so fine a regiment as the Cardinal's Guards doesn't deserve a rascal such as I."

The Cardinal's lips quivered into a near smile. "The guard has one rascal in it already, *monsieur,*" he said with a nod toward d'Entreville. "Another should make little difference. Besides, I have checked your record thoroughly.

"I need swordsmen now, and you are one of the best. Except for rashness, you are the soul of honor. You are loyal also, and that is all that I demand of a man."

Cleve decided that he was a gone goose. He attempted to put a good face on it by saying, "Thank you, *Monseigneur.*" But the words fell unheeded. Richelieu had dropped him and was speaking to d'Entreville.

"As for you, *monsieur le comte,*" he said, "I tremble at the responsibility I am forced to put in your hands. If I were not starved for resourceful rogues, I'd have you in la Bastille. Your foolhardiness is well proven. Yesterday, you saw fit to duck two musketeers in a fountain for laughing at your poetry . . ."

Cleve choked at this, and Richelieu eyed him coldly.

"Yes," he snapped. "It was the same fountain. One would believe it was a public bath." He shrugged and fell back in his chair. "Bah! I do Paris a favor by sending you two out of it. You're both madcaps, *messieurs.* Impudent fools!"

Guy d'Entreville shifted expectantly. Beside him, Cleve scowled. "I wish the old rake would get to the point," he thought.

The Cardinal did. Having established his acid censure of their respective misdeeds, he dropped the stern tone. He beckoned Père Joseph to him. "Have Beaucaire come in."

"Oui, Monseigneur."

As Père Joseph departed, the Cardinal searched among a litter of papers and finally drew for a parchment map of Royal France. He regarded it thoughtfully; and when he looked up, his face was grave.

He said: *"Messieurs,* your mission is vital. You may not know it, but France is on the brink of civil war. I have just had word that le Duc d'Orleans has crossed the border with a rebel army of 6,000 men."

GUY D'ENTREVILLE frowned. Being French he knew the political situation of his country, and the news did not come too much as a surprise. D'Orleans had sworn to ruin Richelieu.

But Cleve didn't know this. He only considered that the Duke of Orleans was the King's brother and heir to the throne; and knowing that, was definitely startled.

"Gad's teeth!" he exploded. "Against the Crown?"

Richelieu's dark eyes hardened. He shook his head. "No," he said quietly. "Against me!"

And then Cleve understood. He had been in France long enough to hear the political gossip about Richelieu's aims. The nation had been weakened for years by a feudalism which gave the nobility right to raise private armies, to levy personal taxes, and to subsidize the throne.

The Cardinal was trying to crush this system. He wanted a united France powerful under but one recognized and centralized government—the kings! Bitterness, hatred, constant intrigue had been the result.

Richelieu picked a quill from the inkstand and tapped its tip lightly on the map. "D'Orleans is not strong enough to try storming Paris," he said softly. "He is passing down the west side of the Rhone River toward Nîmes. There he hopes to enlist more hot-heads and also to effect junction with certain disloyal noblemen in southern France."

He paused, and then, raised the tip of the quill and placed it at Bordeaux on the western edge of the map.

"And here," he continued, "we have the royal army under Marshal Schomberg. It is moving east now, at right angles, to intercept d'Orleans. If my calculations are correct it should meet the rebels near Privas."

The speaker looked up. Père Joseph had

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returned and with him was a swarthy man of medium height, resplendent in red and black. Père Joseph said, "Le Marquis de Beaucaire, *Monseigneur.*"

The Cardinal nodded. Cleve bent close to d'Entreville. "Important?" he asked.

Guy nodded. "Cardinal's agent."

"These are the two who shall officer your escort south, *monsieur le marquis,*" said Richelieu. "May I present le Comte d'Entreville and m'Lord Cleve. They are rogues, but the resourcefulness of their roguery is suited for my purpose."

Beaucaire smiled. It was a nice smile, flashing in white contrast to his skin. He nodded to Cleve but his hawkish features were curious when he regarded d'Entreville.

He said: "*Ma foi!* Aren't you that acid-versed poet with such sharp claws that you are known as the Kitten? The Cardinal's Kitten?"

Cleve felt d'Entreville go rigid. The Frenchman nodded stiffly. "I am," he admitted. His face was red.

Beaucaire smiled politely.

THEN Richelieu stood up. He spoke crisply to Cleve and Guy. "I have selected you, *messieurs,* to escort a shipment of gold south. Understand, it is not a routine detail. Marshal Schomberg's troops have not been paid for two months. The last convoys sent him have been robbed and the men are growing restless. They threaten to desert.

"As the situation stands now, they are either paid or d'Orleans will not be stopped."

D'Entreville nodded understandingly. During the early seventeenth century armies were mercenary; rapidly levied, disbanded again, haphazard.

"I have arranged," Richelieu continued, "for the royal army to pass Beaucaire's Castle on their way to meet the rebels. They must be paid there, or they will mutiny! We have five days to prevent that, *messieurs.*"

The speaker frowned. "Now, concerning your mode of transportation. The other convoys have been waylaid, so this time I will change my tactics."

D'Entreville chewed his lip. He lacked the subtlety of his red-robed superior. To him the way to prevent further robberies would be to increase the escort—a regiment if need be. Richelieu could spare no regiments. With Austria threatening on one side and Spain on another, he needed them at home.

"*Le marquis* is returning to his castle at Beaucaire," he said slowly, "as an innocent traveler. He shall have a traveler's escort. Six men. However, within his coach will be a secret compartment. The gold will be hidden there."

Richard Cleve understood. "*Oui, Monseigneur,*" he said.

"Good." The steel in Richelieu's voice denied failure. "Now leave me and return prepared to quit Paris within the hour. Cordeau is waiting in the guardroom with Beaucaire's personal liveries. Select four men. See that they are dressed in them."

Outside the library, Cleve stared at his new companion reproachfully. "Had you let me alone at the tavern—" he began to say; then changed his mind and smiled. "Hmph! The old man works quickly, eh? Two hours ago I was in the Queen's Guard, suspended and anticipating a holiday."

D'Entreville regarded him thoughtfully, and the faint frown left his forehead. "I wouldn't," he cautioned, "let anyone hear you refer to the Cardinal as 'the old man'. It isn't healthy."

The good intention was lost. Cleve bowed and said mockingly: "Words of wisdom, Kitten, fall upon my poor ears as dew upon parched grass."

Guy d'Entreville's breath caught up short. "Very funny," he snapped. "Mark you, Cleve. Fate insists that we become companions. But if you desire harmony, don't use that title!"

The Englishman inclined his head. " 'Tis remembered, old comrade," he promised.

They swung down the corridor side by side. Cleve eyed his lean companion obliquely, and the devil in him started dancing. He stared ahead.

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"Here Kitty, Kitty, Kitty!"

D'Entreville's lips became a tight line. His hand on the hilt of his sword balled into a lump. Without breaking stride, he jerked it to his stomach. The sword-length swung out; slipped between Cleve's scissoring legs.

A yell—a crash, and Guy d'Entreville, continued his way—alone. Smiling.

CHAPTER III

SWORD-SPORT FOR TWO

TWO days later, the treasure-train reached the halfway mark. Sitting his horse in the orange wash of the setting sun, Cleve scowled and reviewed them remorsefully.

Everything had been quiet. The days—*monotonous*. In a way he felt cheated. When one humbles himself by masquerading as a part of a petty noble's retinue, there should be compensation. But, so far, Richelieu's subterfuge had been so perfect as to make him nearly pray for action.

He cursed silently between his teeth as his eyes swept the surrounding hills lying pale green in the sun. The convoy was threading through lower Bourbonnais, and tonight the stop would be at the village of Lamont.

"Peaceful," he growled, eyeing the landscape. "It makes me itchy."

Behind him, Beaucaire's gaudy blue-and-gold coach rumbled along with the pompousness of a dowager. It was flanked by two riders with another pair trailing and trotting carefully outside the rolling dust of the coach-wheels.

Back there someone was singing. Cleve knew that fine tenor voice. It was d'Entreville's. The song blended pleasantly with the cadence of horse's hoofs.

So I ride, ride, ride.
With a good blade at my side,
And a horse without an equal in the land.
'Tis the gayest life I know . . .

The Englishman twisted in the saddle. His association with Guy had, for the past forty-eight hours, been painful. Despite their mutual animosity, however, he secretly liked the Frenchman. D'Entreville had the nerve and courage which he admired in a man.

Nevertheless, the two of them argued like fish-wives, and only their subconscious congeniality prevented physical violence. Now, as Cleve heard Guy's self-made song, he raised his own baritone in an ill-intentioned parody.

So I ride, ride, ride,
With the Kitten at my side.
He's a Kitten without equal in the land!
Though he dabbles hard with verse,
I can think of nothing worse,
Than an ode which he has written with his—

Whap!

The song ended as a round hard apple, snatched from a low-hanging limb, caromed off the back of the singer's neck. Cleve grinned and spurred his horse to a trot.

The two managed to complete the journey that day without further song or comedy—or hostilities.

Lamont was small. It was a village barely out of swaddling clothes. But it was a favorite coach-stop and boasted of two large hostelries—one at either end of its central thoroughfare. The treasure-train clattered into the courtyard of the first inn, as the last glow in the west faded into purple-pink.

The footman leaped nimbly from the coach, placed a step-stool on the ground and opened the door. But Beaucaire did not step out. He hesitated, scrutinized the inn; then smiled ruefully.

"We shall stay at the other hostelry," he decided, and waved at Cleve and d'Entreville. "Drive on!"

The cavaliers exchanged glances. They didn't speak until they were again on the move. This was the fourth time Beaucaire had taken advantage of the masquerade to make the decisions for the party and they didn't like the idea.

"You know," Cleve said softly, "I am beginning to wonder if Beaucaire has for-

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gotten that we are in charge. The manner in which he acts makes me actually feel like a lackey!"

He paused, scowled, and batted road-dust from his gauntlets. "My first impression of *le marquis* has changed. He smiles too much for my fancy."

D'ENTREVILLE nodded. Those were his sentiments exactly. Beaucaire had not turned out to be the charming companion that they had first believed. His amiable smile and pleasant manners only cloaked a stubborn officiousness.

As Guy became aware of the man's ruthlessness, his ironic humor and his arrogant vanity, he often thought of himself as guardian to a mysterious powder-keg which might erupt at any moment.

He mentioned this feeling now: "Beaucaire seems waiting for something to happen."

Cleve laughed. "Aren't we all? We carry enough gold to tempt a saint."

But that wasn't what d'Entreville had meant. Last evening at Nevers, where the coach had put up for the night, he had caught the marquis in earnest conversation with a strange horseman. Possibly there was nothing to the incident; but the stranger had spurred quickly away at his approach.

Guy hadn't liked that. There had been something furtive about it. Considered now, however, the affair seemed trifling.

He shrugged. He said, "Perhaps," and spurred his horse into the courtyard of the second tavern.

As was customary, the marquis was given the best suite in the tavern while the rest of the party wrapped themselves in cloaks and slept near the coach in the yard behind. The vehicle itself was shared by Cleve and d'Entreville.

Tonight however, as the Frenchman groped his way into the dark tonneau, Cleve was missing. D'Entreville cursed. He had stayed late in the tavern, talking over tomorrow's itinerary with Beaucaire under the impression that the Englishman was on duty.

He turned and called: "Étienne. Sergeant Étienne!"

A lumpish figure on the ground stirred. *"Oui, m'sieu."*

"Where is Cleve?"

Sergeant Étienne scratched his head. Mental agility was not one of his virtues. He waited a long time and then he said, "Oh, Cleve? Hmmmm. He went for a holiday."

D'Entreville stiffened. His jaw grew tight. The fate of a nation was in Beaucaire's coach. Guy felt its responsibility keenly. But Cleve! *Sangodemi!* It was so like that irresponsible fool to walk away and forget it. The Englishman had irked him many times; but now d'Entreville was thoroughly angered.

He snapped, "Where did he go?"

"The tavern at the other end of town, *monsieur.*"

D'Entreville hitched up his rapier. There was going to be a showdown between him and this English rakehelly.

"You're in charge," he told Étienne briefly. "Cut down all prowlers first. Challenge later."

He went past the strong smell of the stable; through the torch-lit courtyard, and into the dark of Lamont's streets. Somewhere off to the right a bell tolled the hour. It was nearly midnight.

A small troop of horsemen thundered by. He stared curiously. They were Montmorency's men. He could tell by the embroidered cross-blades that they carried on their green surcoats. He wondered what the Duke of Montmorency could be doing so far from court, and shrugged.

The matter of Richard Cleve seemed more important. He strode on through the night toward the other tavern without answering the self-posed question.

THE first inn was called Le Gant Blanc. It was trim, well lighted, peaceful-looking from a distance. But as he came up to it the clash and cry of battle greeted him.

Inside, tables were being overturned; glass was being smashed with abandon.

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He reached the polished door. It burst open and a man stumbled out, hands clutching a blood-soaked side. Guy shook his head. He had found Cleve.

He stepped over the wounded man and drew his basket-hilt rapier. Inside was shambles. The wreckage indicated a battle far above the average tavern brawl. He eyed it appreciatively.

In the corner was a knot of struggling figures. Five in all. They had Cleve backed to the wall and were straining to pin him there. D'Entreville flexed his sword and walked leisurely toward them. In the center of the room he stopped and shook his head.

"Cleve, if it wasn't that I'd miss a good fight, I'd let them split your worthless hide."

The Englishman had a smile on his lips. It was tired, strained. Someone had ripped a crimson gas over his left eye and blood trickled into it. He kept wiping the flow back with his free hand as he danced in and out of lancing steel. He was like a wraith. His blade seemed five places at once.

Now he looked up; saw d'Entreville. A steel tip arrowed for his throat. He darted under it and pricked the owner's arm and laughed.

"Hello, Kitten. Join the fun?"

His laugh was forced, thrown recklessly into the teeth of five thirsting blades. A fool's gesture when every breath counted. D'Entreville shook his head. His indignation at Cleve for leaving the coach was washed away in a flood of admiration, although he'd never have admitted it.

"Why not?" he cried. "Do you want all of it?"

A man appeared on the stair-landing directly above the Englishman. A knife glittered in his hand. Guy scooped up a full wine bottle and hurled it. The man caught it full in the face. He wilted over the bannister and crashed to the floor.

"War's declared," the Frenchman grunted.

He hurdled a wrecked bench. Two of Cleve's opponents whirled. He put his steel through one and turned for the other.

But the fight was over. Having lost half their original number, the remaining four dropped their swords and rushed for the door. They'd had enough.

Richard Cleve watched them go, a vacant grin fixed to his lips. He said: "And thus endeth another lesson," and sagged suddenly around the knees. He'd have fallen if Guy hadn't caught him.

"Cleve! Did they pin steel into you?"

The Englishman straightened. He chuckled. "Ridiculous!" Then he slogged across the room, collapsed on a bench and grinned at Guy crookedly. "Among the bottles on the floor," he croaked. "Find a good one. I need a drink, Kitten. I'm cursed near the exhaustion point."

D'Entreville found an unbroken bottle of brandy, and they both drank deep from it before speaking again. The liquor's potent sting did things to Cleve. The mist of fatigue slipped from his eyes.

"Thanks, Guy," he said awkwardly. "I —I'm glad you dropped by. I was but two minutes removed from being made a pincushion."

It was the first time he had used d'Entreville's first name, and the Frenchman caught the significance. There was a pause. Then, he shrugged. "Bah! I did nothing." He stared at Cleve sincerely. "You're a real man, Rick."

FOR two who had always concealed their sentiments beneath a barrage of banter and criticism the conversation was naturally stilted, almost shy. They both felt it, and it made them more uncomfortable. A pledge had been given. A pledge of friendship welded in the fires of danger.

Cleve laughed. "Egad! Had I known that we were going to carry on this way, I'd have written a sonnet or something."

Guy felt relieved. The words put them back on the old familiar footing. He stood up and glowered. "*Corbac!* And what are you doing here, anyway? Ours is not a pleasure jaunt, *monsieur!* We are entrusted with a vital mission. You have a duty!"

"A curiosity," grinned Cleve. He sam-

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pled the brandy some more. "I came to discover Beaucaire's aversion to this particular tavern." He gestured to include the whole room. " 'Tis a pleasant place. As neat as the other. Well, perhaps not at present. But, before the argument . . ."

Guy snorted. "Brawling!" he said. "You are always brawling. Why can't you behave? Must you continually provoke battles?"

Cleve looked offended. "Me?" he asked in an injured voice. "Me? Why I was minding my own business. And then, two popinjays . . ." He pointed to a corpse on the floor. "That fellow in particular began to insult me. The next thing I knew, I was fighting half the tavern. Am I to blame for that?"

Guy didn't say anything. Instead he walked over and looked at the body. His eyes narrowed. The insignia on the dead man's green surcoat was crossed blades. Montmorency's man.

Suddenly he realized that they had all been Montmorency's men. He thought of the hard-riding cavalcade which had passed him on the way to the tavern. A frown cut vertical lines in his forehead. Montmorency had once been a constant companion of le Duc d'Orleans! He remembered that now, with a start.

Cleve was saying: "One thing I know; my late friend there and his comrades didn't want me to leave alive. In fact, the whole battle was planned. But why?" He stood up. "Something's rotten, Kitten."

D'Entreville stared at him and nodded. He had been piecing suspicions together himself and he didn't like the pattern they were making. "Let's get out of here," he said.

They returned to the second tavern with unease tugging at their hearts. It was quiet as they marched up to it. Cleve didn't like that quiet. It was death-like, brooding. Two of the torches had gone out and now only one remained to illuminate the courtyard.

Menace hung in the deep shadows. The heavy stillness shrieked with it. The door ajar; the windows dark and staring. The tavern was gutted of life. Disaster had struck—they knew it instinctively.

Huddled against the dark archway with its sword half unsheathed, a bullet in its head, was a corpse. D'Entreville found it. He recognized Pierre, one of the guardsmen he had selected for the journey.

The cavalier took a swift breath and started to run toward the stables. He felt sick inside. Intuitively, he knew that the coach was gone. Cleve grabbed his shoulder. "Hold on! There may be someone waiting—in the shadows."

Guy relaxed. Cleve was using his head. He steadied himself and let his blade whisper from its sheath. They advanced then. Shoulders touching; eyes probing.

CHAPTER IV

POWDER PUFF IN GREEN

THEY found the others in the rear. They were all dead. Cleve bent beside one and turned him over. It was a stranger. He wore a green surcoat with crossed blades embroidered on it. D'Entreville's lips formed the word hollowly: "Montmorency!"

Cleve nodded and stood up. "They hit the place like a plague. Wiped everything out." He walked over to a pair of parallel ruts. "And they took what they had come for!"

Guy stood with his sword slanted across his boots. Now the realization of the calamity struck like a cudgel.

Sickly he thought, "Schomberg's troops won't be paid. There won't be a royal army. D'Orleans will have time to gather strength now for a war which will wrack France with the horror of internal strife. And, it's my fault! Mine!"

From somewhere in the shadows a faint moan sounded. He glanced in its direction, and then walked over to a clump of bushes. Cleve followed. There was a man lumped under the briar. They picked him up and carried him nearer the light.

It was Sergeant Étienne. Cleve noted the dark stain on the sergeant's chest and shook his head.

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"Bad," he said. "Not much hope."

Étienne opened his eyes as they lowered him to the ground. Guy bent close.

"Étienne. Do you hear me?"

"Oui." The voice was faint, pitifully weak. *"Oui, mon lieutenant."* The speaker looked into Cleve's lean face and chuckled feebly. "Enjoy your holiday, *m'sieu?"*

Cleve had brought the brandy from the first tavern. He gave some of it to the sergeant, and it helped a little.

"What happened, Sergeant?"

Étienne shrugged. "Twelve of them," he croaked. "They swooped into the yard. Killed all before we had chance. I got one, though. Gave an account of myself before —before—" His voice dribbled off.

D'Entreville shook him slightly. "Where's Beaucaire?"

Étienne opened his eyes. They were becoming glazed; he was going fast. "Beaucaire," he muttered. "Hmmm. Beaucaire. He came with them, out of the inn. They got him first. Put him in coach. Kidnaped Beaucaire. Going to make him tell—"

The voice faded into a rattle; and Étienne was staring at them blankly. D'Entreville lowered the head to the ground and stood up.

His voice had ice in it when he said, "And *that* leaves our work cut out for us."

The Englishman nodded absently. His eyes were bleak question marks. Where d'Entreville had been thinking of the consequence, he had been pondering the cause. Now he sent his long sword riding back into its sheath and stared at his tall companion.

HE KNEW that twelve blades against two were long odds. But when he thought of Étienne and the others, the ease with which one could trace a blue-and-gold coach; the stake, and his own cold anger, the odds shrank. He tilted his hat cockily.

"Damme, Guy. We have of a certainty!"

They found the inn-keeper, his family and lackies, hiding in the horse-stalls. D'Entreville routed them out. He showered them with questions, but they were all too terrified to answer sensibly.

"Well!" He finally shrugged. "Which way did they go—or don't you know that, either?"

The lanky inn-keeper washed his hands nervously. The events of the night would be graven in his mind for the rest of his life. He made a sweeping gesture. "To—to the south, *monsieur."*

D'Entreville's eyes sought Cleve's over the man's shoulder, and the slim Englishman shrugged. "Naturally, Kitten. What did you expect?"

The French cavalier frowned. Things had been happening rapidly. He hadn't had time to consider them closely. But the fact which had lurked at the borderline of his mind since the discovery of the missing coach suddenly loomed into expression.

He shoved the inn-keeper aside, told him to saddle two fresh horses, and walked up to Cleve.

"Sacre nom!" he burst out. "There's been a leak! How did Montmorency know that our coach was . . ."

Richard Cleve looked amused. He shook his head and patted the Frenchman's shoulder. "Very clever, Kitten," he commented soothingly. "Relax. Of course, there's been a leak. As a matter of fact, there's been more than a leak. There's been a whole cursed fountain of treachery."

The jibe in Cleve's tone made Guy angry. "Now mark me, Richard Cleve—" he started. But the laughter in the Englishman's eyes stopped him. He shook his head hopelessly. "All right, wise man. Perhaps you can tell me who the traitor is."

Cleve cocked an eyebrow. "It couldn't be you?" he said.

D'Entreville grew purple. "No!"

"Temper, Kitten," the other continued smoothly. "And, it wasn't I." His face grew serious. "So that leaves but one!"

D'Entreville looked startled. "Beaucaire!"

Cleve nodded.

"But that is impossible!"

"Is it?" asked the Englishman softly.

"Yes."

Cleve plucked a wisp of straw from a nearby bale, and eyed it thoughtfully.

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"For a poet, Kitten," he said at length, "You have a singular lack of imagination. Mark this."

He put the straw in his mouth and stared at the Frenchman. "Tonight I visit the first tavern and stumble into a nest of green-coats. They attempt to kill me. Why?" He shrugged. "Because they are waiting to butcher the coach's escort. I know that now."

"But that has nothing to do with Beaucaire," Guy said.

"Hasn't it? Very well, I shall go further. This evening when le Marquis de Beaucaire arrived at the first inn, he did not care to stay there. Damme! He didn't care to stay, because he knew that the place was stuffed with traitors. It's all quite simple, you see."

D'Entreville was thoughtful. Cleve made sense. But the Frenchman found it hard to believe. Whatever his faults Beaucaire was one of Richelieu's trusted agents. The wily Cardinal was not one to select faulty material for his secret police. This knowledge kept nagging at Guy.

"*Mordi!* Your logic is sound, Cleve; but Étienne told us that Beaucaire was a prisoner, a captive, when last seen. Does that sound like treachery?"

Cleve shrugged. "No. But Etienne was dying. Death blurs the vision."

"Possibly."

"Possibly indeed! I tell you, the marquis is hand in glove with Montmorency!"

D'ENTREVILLE shrugged. He was almost convinced, but he wouldn't give Cleve the satisfaction of knowing it. As he considered Beaucaire's treason that episode back at Nevers suddenly became clear. The marquis had sent that rider on ahead to prepare Montmorency's men.

"I think you're babbling nonsense," he told the Englishman.

The inn-keeper led the horses to them personally. He was anxious to see them go. As they swung to the saddle Guy tossed him a small pouch of gold.

"See that a padre attends the men in the rear," he commanded.

"*Mais oui, m'sieu.* Even now I shall go to the parish. Your brave comrades shall be buried decently."

Cleve started forward. "No tricks," he said. "We'll pass this way again." He waited until Guy had drawn abreast him in the dark of the street. "We hope," he finished softly.

D'Entreville nodded. The thing that they were about to attempt wasn't wise. Only a caprice of fate had saved them from the massacre. Next time fortune might not smile. Guy frowned, shrugged indifferently. "Who knows?"

The slim Briton put spurs to his horse. "At best it's a game of chance," he said lightly. "Two against twelve and devil take the odds."

But as they thundered into the night, Cleve couldn't help remembering that had he used his wits to catch the reason for the fight at the tavern, the game would never have had to be played. An ounce of prevention would have saved all.

Dawn found them on the grey ribbon of road leading to Clermont. They were saddle-stained and weary; a trifle worried. They had come many miles. So far, no sign of the coach.

Their horses were beginning to labor beneath the crazy pace. They whipped them on with the cruelty of desperation. A coach can not outrun riders. Although the Marquis had had two hours start, they knew he couldn't be far ahead.

"Fresh mounts!" D'Entreville yelled above the pounding hoofs. "*Corbac!* And soon!"

Cleve nodded. His horse stumbled a trifle and he reached forward and patted its straining neck. "Steady. One more league, boy! Keep heart!"

They careened around the bend and almost overlooked the small tavern hidden there. It was a ramshackle affair, seamed with cracks and vari-colored in greys and browns. Cleve drew up and slipped lightly from the saddle. He eyed the staggered chimney wisping smoke on the gold light of the rising day and grinned.

"Some one is astir. Take the horses to

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the stable and see about fresh ones. I'll order a breakfast."

Guy clutched the reins of the Englishman's horse and held up two fingers. "Two breakfasts," he said. "Big ones. And pump the landlord dry about the coach. *Parbleu!* I hope we're on the right trail." He shrugged and set his horse to a shambling walk.

IN THE rear, the tavern's stables matched the main building in decay—exceeded it in solitude. Guy found them deserted. He stamped about the stalls calling loudly. Finally, he shrugged, led the horses to the trough, watered them and installed them in separate booths.

He started out; then, paused. The animals regarded him pleadingly.

"Sangodemi!" he muttered. "I have other things to do. Be patient. Some one will bring you fodder." One of the horses whinnied softly and he laughed. "Oh, very well. I'll find something."

He discovered a pile of hay near the entrance to the stable. There was a pitchfork against the jamb. He picked it up and thrust the prongs deep into the pile. A startled yelp greeted the effort and a green-clad figure, trailing hay, shot out of the pile. D'Entreville dropped the pitchfork and dove. That green surcoat meant only one thing. Montmorency!

He caught the fugitive cleanly with his shoulder and marveled at the fellow's light softness. The Montmorency guard slammed hard to the floor. A hollow *"Ooof!"* whooshed out—and the figure went limp.

With a scowl d'Entreville arose from the body. *"Pecaire!"* he shrugged. "Snuffed like a candle. Montmorency must be hiring powder puffs for guards." He bent down and rolled the unconscious figure over on its back. "Powder puffs," he chuckled, "Or women. . . ."

He gagged. It *was* a woman! A dark, red-lipped girl of twenty with delicate features made more beautiful by the luster of perfect skin.

She was dressed in man's clothes. Pleasingly, too, but Guy was too flabbergasted to notice. The surcoat of green with its crossed-blades insignia was the only thing that registered. He gulped. *"Sacre nom d'un cochon!* What is a gentleman supposed to do now?"

He attempted patting the face, then the wrists. He rested the head on one knee and fanned it with his big hat. Still the dark lashes did not quiver. The girl was out, definitely!

"Well, my lady," he decided at last, "perhaps cognac will do."

He lifted her. The lightness made him feel sheepish. "Guy d'Entreville—brute," he muttered wryly. But his eyes were narrowed, asking questions. Who was she? Why was she hidden in that hay-pile? And what connection did she have with Montmorency and Beaucaire?

That there was a connection, he was positive. The green surcoat spoke volumes.

CHAPTER V

SING FOR YOUR BREAKFAST

RICHARD CLEVE found the Tavern hushed when he entered. There was a brisk fire in the hearth over which a pot of porridge bubbled sloppily. He grinned. "Faith! There must be a strain of Scot in my host."

There were two guests asleep and snoring softly in the window-seats near the front of the taproom. Cleve hadn't noticed them at first, and he regarded them thoughtfully, wondering faintly how men could sleep in such uncomfortable-looking positions.

He considered waking them; but at that moment the side door burst open and a paunchy little man entered. The Englishman smiled.

"Well, landlord! Do you practice leaving your new-come guests alone? My friend and I have traveled hard through the night. We expect service."

The inn-keeper had been napping in the kitchen. He was fresh awake and peevish. His eyes, sunk deep in fatty sockets, blinked meanly. "This inn serves no breakfasts, *m'sieu!*"

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Cleve looked at the porridge cooking in the hearth and his arm flickered out like a snake. His fingers curled about the dirty collar and he yanked the inn-keeper up short.

"Really now!" he laughed. "No breakfasts, eh?"

His prisoner wiggled vainly. Then he saw the cold devilment in the Englishman's eyes and he stopped.

"But there are exceptions, *monsieur*. There are—*ouch*—exceptions."

Cleve didn't release him yet. "Naturally," he said. "My friend and I are exceptional persons. We enjoy the best of food, and we like information with it."

"*Oui, m'sieu.* I am your servant."

"At what time did a blue-and-gold coach pass here this morning?"

The fat landlord hesitated. His little eyes swept craftily over Cleve's shoulder. Then widened. The Englishman caught the expression. He heard a slight movement behind.

Without warning he ducked and hurled the screaming inn-keeper over his shoulder. There was a grunt followed by the thud of two bodies hitting the floor.

A knife clattered in spinning circles to his feet.

Cleve whirled. The other guest was plunging toward him a stiletto poised high. Cleve grabbed the striking arm with his left hand. He let fly a savage right and the man's head snapped back.

Cleve blew on his knuckles. He kicked the groaning landlord aside, and pulled the first assailant to his knees by the hair. The man was barely conscious. The impact of the inn-keeper's body had knocked most of the wind out of him. Cleve shook the fellow.

"Nice people," he said. "I should have suspected you two, when I first entered. You looked too uncomfortable to be actually slumbering. Egad! I'm growing careless."

The prisoner cringed. "Mercy," he pleaded groggily. "Mercy, in the name of God."

Cleve reached back for a bottle on the mantel over the hearth. He cracked it shatteringly against the stone and held the remaining half in front of his prisoner's horrified eyes. The glass was jagged, vicious-looking.

"All right," said the Englishman. "Sing out, my pretty bird."

In the background the landlord groaned. "Not in my inn, *m'sieu,* please. Not his eyes!" he implored.

Cleve's voice was cold. "Silence, dolt!" He yanked the prisoner's face closer to the broken bottle. "Do you tell your tale, or have I to twist this into your ugly face?"

The prisoner collapsed. "I'll talk, you devil," he blubbered. "I'll talk."

Cleve nodded. "Good." He smiled grimly. "And never mind your opinions of me. When did Beaucaire pass through here?"

"Three hours past, *monsieur.*"

"He expected us?"

"Yes. When he learned that you and d'Entreville hadn't been killed last night, he left René and me behind to take care of you."

Cleve shrugged. The man's words cleared all doubts about Beaucaire. The marquis was in the plot, up to his neck.

"Where is Beaucaire going?"

A slight stubbornness edged into the prisoner's eyes. He closed his lips. With a curse Cleve gave him a small taste of the glass. Just a scratch. But it was enough. The man wilted.

"To his castle, at Beaucaire."

Cleve lifted the bottle. "You lie! Schomberg will be at Beaucaire within a week. The marquis will want none of him."

"The marquis will have a thousand men by then."

CLEVE'S eyes widened. So that was it! Beaucaire was going to use the gold to raise his own troops. The Englishman bit his lip thoughtfully. It followed that Montmorency had done the same with the other robbed shipments.

Then there would be two well-equipped forces to act in accord with d'Orleans!

"A war," Cleve muttered, "of no mean

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size." He smiled grimly. The whole plot had an ironic jest to it. The conspirators were using Richelieu's gold to defeat Richelieu. He stared down at his captive. "Montmorency's army. Where is—"

But, the question was interrupted. Cleve released the prisoner, flashed out with his blade, then relaxed. It was d'Entreville, standing in the doorway with a limp figuse in his arms.

"You'll fetch trouble, sneaking up on people that way, Kitten," Cleve said. "You should sing, or something."

D'Entreville strode into the room. He frowned at the prisoner and at the unconscious form on the floor. "Brawling again, eh? What happened?'

Cleve told him. When he had finished the Frenchman had a tight expression around his lips. "You realize what it means, of course," he said.

"Certainly. Unless something is done quickly, France will not be independent much longer. The moment civil war weakens her enough, Spain and Austria will step in to establish order."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," d'Entreville admitted gravely. "But you're right." He shrugged and stared down at the girl in his arms. He didn't like to think about it.

"Look what I found," he said.

Cleve stared. "Why damme!" he exclaimed. "It's a girl. A beautiful girl!"

At his feet the prisoner gasped. The Englishman tapped him with the rapier. "No tricks. Understand?" He returned to Guy. "Faith, Kitten, from now on, *I'll* take care of the horses." Then, he frowned. "Hmm. Green surcoat?"

D'Entreville nodded. His voice was loaded with significance. "Precisely. A green surcoat!'

In his arms the girl moaned softly, stirred. He carried her to a bench and sat her down on it. "Inn-keeper," he yelled. "Fetch some brandy."

Cleve's other prisoner grunted and sat up groggily. "Wha-what happened?" he wanted to know.

"You forgot to duck," Cleve told him. He snagged the inn-keeper's arm as that worthy appeared from the kitchen carrying a bottle. "Give me your keys, landlord."

The in-keeper had seen enough and heard enough to make him respect this Englishman. He surrendered the keys without question and scuttled over to Guy with the brandy.

Cleve forced his grumbling captives upstairs. He locked them in a small closet, pocketed the key and returned to the taproom. He found d'Entreville pouring brandy down the girl's throat, the innkeeper watching fascinatedly.

"Breakfast, you lout!" Cleve bellowed, bringing the flat of his blade across the fat man's breeches. "And be quick about it!"

The landlord bounded into the kitchen yelping *"Oui's."* The girl opened her eyes. They were beautiful eyes, soft brown and at the moment confused. Cleve sat down opposite her so that he could see them better.

"Good morning, m'dear," he said pleasantly and frowned at d'Entreville. "I'll take care of her now."

Guy's arms held firmly to the girl's shoulders. "You are too cursed kind for your own good," he said.

Cleve shrugged. The girl said, "Good morning." Her voice was soft, rather faint. Cleve liked it. He began to tell d'Entreville that if he was a true gentleman—but the French cavalier wasn't heeding him.

"You feel better, *mademoiselle?"* he asked.

"Yes. What—what happened?"

Cleve looked at the Frenchman bitterly. "This lout would know," he told her.

Guy flashed. "Wait till I get you alone."

THEN the girl gasped. "Now I remember. I was in the barn. *Oui!* I was hiding." At this point her eyes blazed. "And you,"—she turned on Guy—"tried to stab me; you hurled me to the floor!"

Cleve made sympathetic sounds and glared at d'Entreville. The crimson Frenchman attempted a weak defense.

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"But, *mademoiselle—*"

The girl's hand flashed up and slapped across the startled Frenchman's lips.

"Cochon!"

Guy caught her hands in self-defense. Cleve started to laugh, but the girl's hot gaze swept him and he frowned and shook his finger at d'Entreville.

"Shame on you, Kitten!" he said.

"Never mind being gallant," Guy snapped. "We have a lot of questions to ask this young lady. In the first place, I want to know why she was hiding, and in the second place why she is garbed in Montmorency's uniform."

Cleve stood up and shook his head. "I merely want to know her name," he admitted.

The girl said, "I'll answer nothing! Nothing! Do you understand?"

D'Entreville got to his feet. He was still holding her hands in a strong grip and his eyes were determined.

"Mademoiselle," he said patiently, "boorishness is not my habit to one so beautiful as you. But—" His voice became flint-like. "I have a duty to France. You'll answer my questions."

Cleve said: "Egad! You'd be a good poet, if you hadn't such a strong love of duty, Kitten." He looked at the girl. "But, he's right, m'dear. Duty knows no courtesy. We're on the King's business."

She laughed. "Liar!" she cried. "Do you not think that I know the uniform you wear? The King's business indeed! Those sky-blue surcoats with their gold trim are the very liveries of my own brother!"

CHAPTER VI

RIDE A SLOW HORSE

THE statement fell like a blow on their credulity. D'Entreville recovered first. *"Corbac!* It's true! Her face has been teasing my memory and now I see it. Two years past—presented at court." He stared. "Am I correct, *mademoiselle?"*

She nodded.

Cleve pursed his lips. He wanted to know why le Marquis de Beaucaire's sister was dressed like a man. Why she had hidden in the stable of a decrepit little hostelry half a league from Clermont.

"I shall tell you nothing," the girl snapped.

The Englishman bowed and said, "Your beauty is exceeded only by your stubbornness."

The girl regarded him defiantly. "Precisely, *monsieur!"*

Cleve shrugged. He was tempted to shake her, but his better instincts prevailed. He had been brought up to be a gentleman; and although he had often doubted the wisdom of it, the fact remained that he couldn't lay violent hands on a woman.

Just then, the pudgy inn-keeper appeared staggering beneath a full tray. The sight of food made up the Englishman's mind and he took the girl firmly by the arm.

"Very well, m'lady. For the present, you win."

She wrenched free of him. "What are you going to do?"

Cleve smiled faintly. "First I'm going to lock you in a room; and then I intend to enjoy the first meal I've had in twelve long hours." He bowed graciously. "After you, *mademoiselle."*

The girl hesitated, contemplating rebellion, but the dancing light in the Englishman's eyes dissuaded her. She shrugged and preceded him up the creaking stairs at the end of the room.

. . . Breakfast was good. Stewed fruit, porridge, bacon, and frothy chocolate. When they had finished Cleve pushed aside the naked plates and regarded d'Entreville. He saw that the Frenchman was thinking the same thoughts as he, and chuckled.

" 'Tis a simple kettle of trouble, Kitten," he said. "And it has but four ingredients.

"First, there is the Duke of Orleans marching his army down the west side of the Rhone. Second, there is Schomberg's royal army marching from the west to intercept him. Third, there is a traitor who had made off with the gold for his own ends."

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Cleve sighed. "And fourth, there are two foolish cavaliers—ourselves. Add these ingredients one by one. Season with a mysterious lady who is the traitor's sister and two futile assassins, and you have a devil's brew."

D'ENTREVILLE didn't appreciate the whimsy. He was thinking about Schomberg's army marching toward Beaucaire Castle in hope of being paid. The French cavalier could visualize the scene. The royal army would be paid. Paid in bullets! Beaucaire Castle was strong and with a small force Beaucaire could hold it for months. The royal army would disband.

"Corbac!" he exclaimed. "We should warn Marshal Schomberg."

"Why?" The Englishman's tone was amused. "Do you wish to disband his army sooner than expected?"

"Sacre nom! That is right, too. Hmmph! We are in a *cul de sac,* eh?"

Cleve picked up a crust of bread, tore off a piece and popped it into his mouth. "It appears that way. I fear that there is small hope of catching Beaucaire now. Of course we could try."

D'Entreville leaned forward. "That is precisely what I am going to do, Cleve." His dark eyes held a challenge; a question in them. "I'll follow that swine into his castle."

Cleve knew that he was being sounded. The mere fact that D'Entreville thought it necessary made him grin wryly.

"Really?" he said. "You realize of course, that when Beaucaire does not hear from his hirelings, he'll be on guard. He knows us for fools. He'll be expecting us."

"Sangodemi! What of it?"

Cleve nodded and stood up. He gave Guy's head a push and laughed. "Come on, fool. We'll see about fresh horses."

They found the landlord and went out to the stables. Beaucaire had taken all the fresh horses for his coach and the only mounts remaining were at pasture. They went to the field behind the barn and inspected the beasts.

"Mordi! Do you call those things horses?" D'Entreville cried. "They're insults to their breed."

The inn-keeper looked apologetic. He observed that the horses were rather jaded, but Beaucaire had given them a hard ride. He was very sorry. In fact, he verged into tears when Guy scowled at him.

"Well," the Frenchman decided, "there is not much we can do. Saddle the two best, and we'll pray that they carry us as far as Clermont without collapsing."

DURING this exchange Cleve leaned against the fence and said nothing. Now he turned. "Never mind the best. Saddle the oldest horse, the most disreputable of the lot. The dappled-grey mare over there in the corner will do."

The pudgy proprietor's mouth gaped, but Cleve eyed him sternly. *"Oui, monsieur.* Immediately. *Oui!"*

He waddled off like a frightened penguin. D'Entreville tapped Cleve's shoulder gently.

"More comedy, *mon ami?"*

"On the contrary. I'm becoming clever."

"Or a trifle addled."

"Why, Kitten!"

"Sangodemi! Don't call me Kitten!"

"All right."

"Hmmph! You're a liar. Now perhaps you'll tell me what you've dug up with your presumed mind."

Cleve relaxed against the fence, crossed one booted leg over the other. He grinned. "Beaucaire is a very clever fellow!"

D'Entreville's foot shot out, caught under Cleve's supporting leg and yanked. The Englishman crashed to the ground.

"Pecaire! Cleve, some day you shall learn to answer simple questions—simply!"

From his sitting position Cleve shook his head, plucked a blade of grass and inserted it between his teeth. The rough handling did not affect him in the least. "Temper Kitten," he said. "You did not give me opportunity to finish."

"Well, finish then. Here, give me your hand."

The Englishman shook his head wisely.

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"Ah no. I feel safer on the ground, thank you." He inspected the blade of grass thoughtfully before looking up again. "As I was saying, Beaucaire is clever and if we are to beat him we must—"

Suddenly his voice trailed. He had shifted his gaze indifferently toward the rear of the tavern, but now his eyes blinked wide and he vaulted to his feet.

"The prisoners," he cried. "They're escaping."

D'Entreville whirled. He saw the girl and the two men climbing into the saddles of the horses he had put into the stables earlier. The girl seemed to be objecting about something. Suddenly one of the men reached down and swept her to the pommel. Then they were galloping away before Cleve had taken three steps.

"Ah well," the Englishman sighed. "They made it. But they shan't get far. Those mounts are about done in." He turned to Guy. "Come on, Kitten. Let's retire to our host's kitchen and see how many pots and pans he has."

D'Entreville's eyes widened. Then narrowed. Cleve had something on his mind but he didn't trust him. "If this is some more of your putrid comedy—" he threatened.

But the Englishman was already striding toward the tavern.

CHAPTER VII

COME INTO MY DUNGEON

BEAUCAIRE was a small town of a few thousand, standing opposite Avignon and dominated by a huge feudal castle which had been renovated during the reign of Francis I.

It was a town not easily startled by the bizarre appearance of its many transients because it was on one of the major arteries which connected Paris with southern France.

The advent of a wandering tinker, seated upon a sway-backed mare, led by a dirty-faced apprentice, caused no more than an incurious stare from a few idle citizens.

The tinker had come from the north. For lack of a more convenient place, he carried the impliments of his trade—an unholy conglomeration of pots and pans—upon the swaying rump of his horse. His hat was grey, smudgy and brimless; the hair beneath matted, unkempt.

He rolled in his saddle, arms dangling, and left no doubt in the minds of many as to the utterly shiftless mode of his living.

The apprentice was cut from the same cloth. He trudged along at a listless pace, hand on the bridle more as in need of support than to lead, with a blank grin on his unshaven face and a low tune in his throat.

Had any of the hurrying burghers bothered to listen they would have heard,

So I walk, walk, walk,
With the Kitten at my hock,
He's a Kitten without equal in the land

But, even had the burghers listened and understood the droned words, they could not have understood the tinker's crazy reaction.

He reached back deliberately, gripped a pot, and banged it smartly atop the coned hat of his musical assistant.

"Sangodemi! Quiet, Cleve, or by—"

The Englishman grinned through the grime. *"Ssh!"* he cautioned. "Remember, my name is Jacques."

"Very well, Jacques. If you value your life don't—"

Clevel pulled the mare to a stop. They were in the middle of the marketplace near the foot of the castle. Busy crowds surged about them and the shadow of the castle's great bastion lent solidness to the movement.

It was late in the afternoon. The townsfolk clustered about the food vendors intent upon buying the evening meal. The babble of voices unending.

"Well, Kitten. Here we are."

D'Entreville slid from the saddle with an experienced grace entirely out of keeping with a tinker's manner. He sent a

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thoughtful glance toward the portcullis of the castle and noted the guards in green surcoats standing there.

"Corbac," he muttered. "To get past them will be a problem." He looked at Cleve. "I presume the next move for us is to rent a stall, set up a business, and trust that trade is bad. If someone asks me to mend a kettle I'll be in a pretty fix."

Cleve grinned. "You could develop a sore hand or something," he suggested, and pointed toward a stall twenty yards to the right whose occupant seemed engaged in moving. "There is our place."

They approached the owner of the booth. He was a leather worker of long proportions both of body and face. He was piling his merchandise angrily into a two-wheeled cart, muttering as he did so.

D'Entreville said, "Hola, *mon am.* You are moving out, eh?"

The lanky leather worker paused, put his hands on his hips and spat forcefully. "Yes! And if you are wise you'll do the same. Hell will break in Beaucaire shortly. I'm leaving while the leaving is good!"

"Really? And, what will cause this Hell?"

THE man cast a black look at the castle. "Rebellion," he said frankly. "Le Marquis de Beaucaire and le Duc de Montmorency are recruiting. Every day for the past week unemployed soldiers have been drifting into town. I know the signs. The war-drums are getting ready to roll, and when they do, it is no place for an honest worker."

"But the other booths are full," Guy observed.

"They'll be gone tomorrow. Word has just come that Schomberg's army is on the march here. Note the crowds around you, *m'sieu.* The townsfolk are smart. They are buying provisions from a long siege."

D'Entreville shook his head. "I don't believe you," he said bluntly. "I have been told that Beaucaire is a good place to trade. I have traveled far, and here I stay! How much for your stall, *monsieur?"*

The leather worker laughed bleakly. He threw the last of his goods into the cart and climbed aboard. "Nothing," he said. "To take money from a fool is bad luck."

Then he slapped leather on the rump of his horse and went away, bumping awkwardly across the square, and leaving d'Entreville red-faced and speechless with anger. Cleve rubbed a thoughtful finger along the stubble on his chin. Suddenly he laughed and clapped Guy upon the back.

"Well, come on, fool," he said heartily, "let's get unpacked!"

D'Entreville's foot shot out. But Cleve evaded it merrily, spinning lightly on his heels. The maneuver carried him swiftly over the cobbles.

He didn't see the two guards, resplendent in their plumed hats and green surcoats, and they didn't see him. Mutual ignorance resulted in a heavy impact. Cleve struck them like a bowling ball.

"Corbac et Sacre nom d'un cochon!" One of the guards roared struggling to a sitting position. His comrade was not as verbal. He lay face down in the mud with Cleve sprawled atop him. "What is this?"

"A mistake," Cleve assured him and bounded to his feet. "A thousand pardons, *monsieur."* He looked closely at the mud-packed face of the other who was now rising, and added hastily, "A million pardons to you."

"Sangodemi! I'll murder him! I'll cut his heart out!" howled he of the mud-filled face.

D'Entreville stepped up. In his hand he held a heavy soldering iron. He glared at Cleve. "Brawling again, eh?" he said *"Mordi!* Can't you keep out of trouble!"

"But, it wasn't my—" Cleve began to protest.

AT THAT moment, the guards decided to avenge the indignity done them. Muddy-face whirled Cleve around with the intention of cuffing him soundly, only d'Entreville interrupted. He rapped Muddy-face across the knuckles and Muddy-face danced away howling.

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And then the other guard started to go for his sword, but Cleve drove his fist into the fellow's belly.

From up the square, six more guards witnessed the outrages being committed on their comrades and charged to the rescue. D'Entreville bent his soldering iron over the head of the first one and Cleve lashed out with his fist and sent another back on his heels. Guy regarded the Englishman in amazement.

"*Parbleu!* With your fists? Where did you learn to fight that way?"

"England," puffed Cleve. "The common people on my father's estate call it boxing."

The battle was short, after that. Bare fists and a soldering iron are no match for a quartet of rapiers. Cleve and d'Entreville took one look at the steel, shrugged, and surrendered.

"Take them to the dungeon," bawled one of the guards, a sergeant. "They have attacked the soldiers of the duke. *Le marquis* will judge them."

"Fine mess," d'Entreville growled to Cleve, as they were marched away.

"Hush, Kitten." The Englishman grinned. "We are getting into the castle."

Montmorency's guards marched them through the gate, across the outer bailey, and into the armory building which adjoined the north wall and surmounted the dungeon. With each step d'Entreville's hopes diminished.

As itinerant tinkers he and Cleve had plotted to enter the walls under guise of being commissioned to repair the pots and pans of the kitchen. Then they would have had opportunity to reconnoiter without suspicion. But now—they were trapped. And destined to languish in a stinking cell until their fate was decided.

They were pitched roughly into a large room. It was dirty, deserted. It wasn't a regular cell but seemed to be a sort of forgotten guardroom unused for decades. Cleve inspected it thoughtfully and wondered why they had been put here instead of in the main dungeon. He asked the jailer. The man shrugged.

"The dungeon's being used to store arms. Ball and powder," he said.

Cleve nodded. Recruits had been drilling in the bailey when he and Guy had come through it. This sight and now the knowledge of the vast amounts of munitions being stored away, converged into one fact. Beaucaire Castle was to be used as a seat of war.

He turned to mention it to his companion. Guy was over in a corner, bending beneath a worm-eaten table, the cell's lone piece of furniture.

"Faith. What the devil are you up to?"

The French cavalier threw a furtive glance over his shoulder. Then he settled on his haunches and displayed that which he had in his hands. It gleamed dully in the half-light.

"I found it behind this table," he said softly.

Cleve looked closer. It was the latter part of a broken broadsword. Its hilt was green with corrosion and extended for exactly half of the whole piece. "Damme! That's an old thing. Been here for a hundred years, no doubt. They can't have cleaned this room very thoroughly before pitching us into it. Perchance there is more to be found."

Without another word they bent down and combed the cell for further weapons. It was futile, but they continued with the stubbornness of hope. So engrossed were they in the task that they didn't notice the door swing open to admit an officer of the guards and his squad of eight.

CLEVE made the discovery. On hands and knees he had worked himself nearer the door. His hands sifted through the dust on the floor, fluttered across the toe of a jack-boot.

His eyes followed the toe to the heel; from the heel to the calf; to the thigh, to the red velvet sash, and then into the officer's frowning face.

The Englishman grinned weakly.

"Hello," he said.

The officer snorted. "*Nom du Diable!* What is this?"

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Guy d'Entreville, engaged in a corner, whirled at the voice and leaped to his feet. The sword-hilt tinkled to the floor and an alert guardsman scooped it up.

"A broken sword?" the officer asked, staring at it. He shoved it into his sash and laughed. "Tricky varlets, aren't you? Well, it will do you no good. Fall in. I'm taking you up to the main hall for your judgment. It won't go any easier with you when I tell *monsieur le marquis* of this attempt to escape."

Le Marquis de Beaucaire sat behind the elevated table in the main hall and stared indifferently at the two ragamuffins who had been led before him.

As a rule he liked the prerogative which, as a noble of a semi-feudal domain, gave him the right to sit in judgment over his fellow men. But tonight he was tired, listless. Beside him, le Duc de Montmorency crossed his legs and sighed.

Montmorency was a handsome man still under forty, and looked younger than his years. He was a dashing sort of person, adored by women, hot-blooded, impulsive. The present scene bored him.

"*Sandieu!*" he muttered to Beaucaire, "this sort of thing went out with plate armor. Why don't you turn it over to the civil courts in the town? We're living in the Seventeenth Century, Mazo! Not in 1266."

Beaucaire shrugged, rested his hawkish face on the palm of his hand and stared at the prisoners. "It amuses me," he said. "Life can be boring at times, and the tales that some of these wretches tell me are laughable." He eyed the officer who had brought in the culprits. "Very well, *capitaine*. The charges?"

"Assaulting eight guardsmen, interfering with a patrol, attempting murder with a broken sword, conspiring to escape their just punishment, disturbing the peace—"

One of the prisoners, the slighter of the two, turned.

"Damme!" he erupted, "either you are a proficient liar, or you've mistaken us for two other prisoners!"

The *capitaine* raised his hand to smash the face of his accuser. Beaucaire's crisp command stopped him. The marquis was straight in his chair now. No longer indifferent, bored. He sank his dark eyes into the men before him; stripped aside the rags, the grime; and smiled.

"*Ma foi!*" he said. "Le Comte d'Entreville and m'Lord Cleve."

CHAPTER VIII

TURN OF THE DICE

SILENCE fell like a mantle over the great hall. Time seemed frozen. Beaucaire remained sitting with that triumphant smile smearing his face. Montmorency was astounded, the *capitaine* and guards confused. And Guy d'Entreville's heart filled with despair.

It was Cleve who broke the quiet. He cursed the English accent which had given them away, but it was typical of him to smile.

"Hmmm," he said and shrugged. "Well, the jig's up." He thrust hands into his pockets and looked impudently at the marquis. "Greetings—swine!"

Beaucaire started as if slapped. The smile left his lips. His eyes glittered with a cruel coldness. "You are most welcome, *messieurs*," he said with great control. "We've been expecting you."

Cleve nodded. "I thought as much. The two that you left to murder us are better messengers than assassins."

Beaucaire stood up. The Englishman's manner infuriated him. "You're a clever one, aren't you. What did you intend to do in those disguises?"

Cleve folded his arms. "Guess," he said pleasantly.

Beaucaire shook his head. "I don't need to. The fact that you are here is all that I need to know." He turned to Montmorency who was leaning back in his chair regarding Cleve and d'Entreville narrowly. "These are the two, *monsieur le duc*."

"I've gathered that," Montmorency nodded. "They've caused a deal of mischief, haven't they?"

"Enough," Beaucaire replied. He smiled.

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"In war time, Henri, when an enemy is caught wearing a disguise, what is the penalty?"

"Death. Naturally."

Beaucaire folded his hands and nodded. "Naturally," he said.

D'Entreville surged forward. Two guards grabbed his arms and jerked him back. "You filthy dog! You wouldn't dare!"

Beaucaire raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "Wouldn't I?" he asked. Suddenly, his fist hit the table.

"You'll hang! I'll string you from the wall for Schomberg to admire. Yes, and in your vile rags! 'Twill be a fine sight to see two gentlemen, a French *comte* and an English lord, dangling in rags like common felons. A fine sight!"

Cleve, still with his hands in his pockets, rolled easily on his heels. He had been whistling softly through his teeth during Beaucaire's vituperation. Now he stopped and eyed the marquis calmly.

"Faith! You lose composure quickly. Aren't you a little mad, *monsieur?* A trifle drunk with petty power?"

Beaucaire was livid. His hand trembled. "Take them away," he shouted. "Take them out of my sight, until morning!"

"Your wish," smiled Cleve, "is their command. Good evening gentlemen. And if you sleep—pleasant dreams!"

THEIR cell was clean when they returned to it. The fat jailer, having witnessed the episode with the broken sword, had guarded against possible recurrence. The floor had been swept of its ancient dust; even the lone piece of furniture had been removed.

In the corner were two mattresses of straw, a pitcher of water. Nothing more. Cleve flopped down, cradled his head and regarded d'Entreville.

The Frenchman was pacing the room like a caged tiger. His fate wasn't what bothered him. He wasn't afraid. He was angry clear through.

"The filthy swine! The scabby traitor! Oh, had I but one minute alone with him . . ."

"Half a minute," Cleve said and chuckled. "Ah relax, Kitten. That is your trouble. You anger too easily."

Guy came over and sat down. He didn't speak. His eyes swept the cell. It was long, low-ceilinged, with solid stone walls on four sides unpierced by windows.

The only egress, the lone means of ventilation, was the iron door at the further end. He stared at this carefully. The lower half was solid metal; the upper portion, striped with iron bars. It was escape-proof.

"*Corbac!* This is a tight little nest. It leaves nothing to the imagination."

"True," Cleve nodded. "Too true." He raised his head and squinted at the door. Fortunately there was a torch-pot opposite it in the corridor. He watched the file of men passing by and said, "I wonder why our friends out there are so busy? They've been carrying powder-kegs and ball from below ever since we've arrived."

Guy shrugged. "Our cell is adjacent to the castle's main bastion. That corridor connects the armory with the tower room. There is a forty-pound Carthoun cannon mounted atop it. I overheard one of the guards talking while we were being led back. They expect to do great things when Schomberg arrives tomorrow. Height will double the Carthoun's ordinary range."

"Faith! A pretty idea! A cannon in the tower-top and a whole army marching up to it unsuspecting. That's about all Schomberg's troops need. No pay for months and a gun hurling death down on them after a long trek."

The Englishman sat up and smiled wryly. "Our friend the marquis has plotted well. After the first two charges, Schomberg will have trouble in keeping his men from desertion, much less having them storm the castle."

"*Mordi!* Had we but a way to warn them!"

"False hope, Kitten. We'll be too cursed busy kicking our lives out on the wall to care much about the royal army."

Four hours crawled into the gloom. At midnight the castle settled down. From the wall-walks sleepy sentinels called their post

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tunelessly. Cleve and Guy had borrowed a set of dice from the jailer. Now, as the muffled "All's well" cries seeped down to them, they paused in the play.

Twelve o'clock! They had six possibly seven hours left of life. Finally the Englishman laughed.

"Ten thousand you owe me," he said. "Your luck has run out, Guy."

D'Entreville stared through the dimness. The torch in the corridor was guttering. Its light coated the side of his face in wavery orange. His lips were drawn, his eyes helpless. He had made the mistake of allowing his imagination to work. Cleve's chiding words cracked it. *"Corbac!* And that is true!"

He raised his hand to hurl the senseless dice away, but Cleve's voice came solidly through the half murk. "Play them, Kitten!"

Guy relaxed. He rattled the cubes, half ashamed. "Of course, clown. My luck will turn. Wager a thousand."

Suddenly his hand stopped in mid-air. His eyes were fixed on the door. *"Parbleu* Cleve. We have a visitor."

CLEVE didn't turn. His voice came soft: "Better to go down fighting than to hang. I'll knock his legs from under him. Grab his sword."

"But it isn't a he!"

"Eh?" The Englishman stood up and turned. Coming toward them, outlined sharply, was the figure of a woman. A young woman, lithe and graceful in her step. She held her finger to her lips.

D'Entreville gasped. "You!"

"Yes, it is I," she said softly.

It was the girl of the tavern, Beaucaire's sister. Cleve said, "Thoughtful of you to come to gloat."

"You are cruel, *monsieur*. I have come to help you."

"A likely tale."

" 'Tis the truth. Had I believed you two days ago at the tavern, this might not have happened."

Cleve glanced at d'Entreville. The Frenchman was serious, intent. The Briton shrugged. "Pray continue, *mademoiselle.* We have little else to do, and no appointments until tomorrow morning."

The girl bit her lip at his casual reference to the execution. She looked over her shoulder at the jailer who was standing indifferently in the doorway with a torch in his fist.

"Please believe me, *monsieur,"* she said. "I am a loyal subject. I want no part in the treason that my mad brother has started. For two months he has kept me a virtual prisoner in the castle; then three nights ago I escaped dressed in a guard's uniform. I tried to reach Paris to warn the King of this plot and plead clemency for my brother."

"He'll need more than clemency now," d'Entreville said.

The girl cast him a despairing look. "It's not Mazo's fault," she replied. "He has fallen under the influence of that devil Montmorency. The promise of great glories has made him mad. He's like a child. Blind to the wrong he's doing. Surely, you can understand that?"

"We can try," Cleve compromised. He eyed her closely. "You were trying to reach Paris . . ."

"Yes. I stopped at that little inn where you found me, to change horses. While I was there my brother's coach drew into the courtyard. I was frantic. Should he see me he would know my business and take me back."

"So you hid in the stable."

"Yes. I covered myself with hay. It was soft and I was tired. I was asleep—" Here she paused, smiled ruefully at Guy— "—when you awakened me, *monsieur."*

"Er— Yes."

"Afterward in the tavern, when I saw both of you in my brother's livery, I refused to believe your loyalty to the Crown. It wasn't until Pierre and René broke into my room that I realized my error."

Guy asked: "Pierre and René?"

"The lads who tried to knife me," Cleve said. "Continue, *mademoiselle."*

"René had recognized me in the taproom. He and Pierre forced me to return

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with them to Beaucaire." She looked earnestly into the faces of the two cavaliers.

"AND that is all. I have heard the sentence which my poor mad brother has passed on you. I have come to aid. I ask only that you speak a kind word in his behalf after this rebellion collapses. For your Richelieu will pardon him."

She fumbled in her handbag and furtively withdrew a large key. "Take this. It is the duplicate of the one which opens the door to this room."

Cleve felt the cool thrill of the metal in his palm. He inclined his head. "You are a brave woman, *mademoiselle*."

Her earnestness disregarded the words. "Tonight the gate will be opened to allow Montmorency's coach to leave."

D'Entreville frowned. "The duke is not staying?"

"No. He is on his way to inform le Duc d'Orleans of Schomberg's collapse."

"Confident fellow," Cleve said.

"That is all I can do for you, *messieurs*," the girl shrugged. "Go to Schomberg and warn him of the ambuscade that the rebels have awaiting him."

D'Entreville bowed over her hand. "My gratitude shall be eternally yours, *mademoiselle*."

Cleve sniffed. "We're not out of here yet, Kitten." Then he softened. He stared at her and finished simply. "Thanks."

She smiled, laughed softly. "You English are so clipped, yet so sincere," she said. "I trust you will be equally sincere in practicing your gratitude. When this is over, pay it by saving my brother's life."

"Richelieu is a hard man, *mademoiselle*," Guy pointed out. "He is ruthless to his enemies, implacable."

"Promise that you will intercede for my brother," she insisted.

D'Entreville shrugged. "I promise," he said.

And then she was gone. Gone in a swirl of satin through the iron door at the end of the room. The jailer followed heavily and Cleve stared at d'Entreville.

"The dead live again," he said and flipped the key in his hand. "How do you feel, Kitten?"

"Like singing. Come. Let's get out of here!"

"Not so fast, my friend. What plan have we?"

"To leave, of course; and then, to warn Schomberg."

Cleve shook his head. "And what good would it do? Beaucaire still has the gold. He has a dungeon crammed with munitions. Warning Schomberg will not save France from a civil war. We must find the treasure, Kitten. And, if we can't steal it—destroy it."

Guy stared. "Parbleu! You speak of miracles!"

The Briton looked at the key in his hand and then at the door through which the girl had gone. "After this," he said, "I believe in miracles! Come on."

THEY found the jailer. He was seated on a stool in the tower room which prefixed the short stair-flight leading down to their cell. At the right, stone steps spiraled upward intothe bastion. The jailer sat facing them, intent upon his midnight snack. He didn't suspect the figures creeping up behind him.

They pounced.

"One outcry, *mon ami*," d'Entreville murmured, his lean fingers taloned about the jailer's fat neck. "One peep, and I squeeze. Get his keys. We'll lock him below."

The prisoner remained passive. The Englishman fumbled, removed a large keyring and a knife. For a moment d'Entreville's fingers relaxed. Like a greased fish the chubby jailer slipped away.

"Ho the watch!" he howled. "*A moi!* There's villainy afoot! They escape!"

Cleve made a despairing dive. The man scuttled through the door as the Englishman fell heavily across the table. Guy charging forward tripped over him. Then the jailer was in the bailey dancing excitedly and shouting.

Lights appeared. Yelled questions rang through the night. From around a corner

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in the court the officer of the Guard trotted, closely followed by a squad. Cleve and Guy saw him. They struggled to their feet, grabbed the door, swung it shut and dropped its bar into place.

"Thank God it's made of iron," d'Entreville gasped. "They'll not batter it down quickly."

Cleve didn't answer. He left the door in a bound and mounted the spiral stairs two at a time. On the first landing a confused guardsman was coming in off the wall-walk.

"What's the clamor for?" he asked. Cleve's fist slammed up sharply and he grunted.

The Englishman kicked the body out of the way, banged the door closed and leaned against it relievedly. That had been close!

But, now the door was shut. It was made of iron, small and compact. It would take a long time to batter down. He caught his breath and moved across to the one opposite. He barred this too.

Then, to be on the safe side, he trotted half-way up the stairs and called, "Ho, up there! Come down at once. You're needed!" When there was no reply he nodded, satisfied. He and Guy had the tower to themselves.

CHAPTER IX

BLASTING PARTY

WHEN he returned to the ground floor the main door was ringing beneath blows. Guy was nowhere in sight. Cleve darted to the doorway leading toward the dungeon and the armory and met the Frenchman carrying an armload of muskets, ball and powder.

"Remember the door to the armory," Guy explained. "It's six-inch oak and studded with steel. It'll take them two hours or more to smash through it."

He carried the muskets to the center of the tower room. "In the meantime, let's see if we cannot discourage the din our friends are making at the main door."

He went to a cruciformed loop-hole and thrust the muzzle of a musket through it. By craning the gun against the stone he could command part of the tower door. He aimed low and pulled the trigger. A howl of pain rewarded the effort. The pounding ceased.

"Well. It's quieter now."

"Yes. But they'll be at the other entrances in a moment," Cleve said. He picked up a musket with a pouch of powder and ball, and walked to the stairs.

D'Entreville smiled. Reckless confidence was pounding through his veins. "*Pecaire!* We've a fighting chance, now."

Suddenly the tower vibrated to the thud of something heavy being smashed against one of the iron doors leading to the wall. Outside, the whole castle blazed with light. The babble of countless voices.

Yelling, angry voices tinged with surprise and confusion seeped through the thick stone walls. Cleve listened and laughed. He said: "I fear we have interrupted our host's slumber."

Guy sent a warning shot through the loop-hole. "Too bad," he said wryly. Then, frowning, "I wonder how long we can keep this up?"

The Englishman's eyes were reckless. "I'm pondering the same thing, Kitten!"

He shrugged and mounted the stairs.

At the top of the bastion he found the castle crouched at his feet like a sullen dog. It was crawling with lights, and in the darkness they reminded him of scattered pearls on sable. He frowned away this fancy and bent over the parapet.

Below he could make out the dim lane of the wall-walk. There was a dark cluster on it, near the foot of the tower. The cluster moved in rhythmic surges. It battered a log against the iron side door.

"We'll have none of that, boys!" Cleve muttered.

He sent a musket ball whistling earthward. The cluster burst apart, retreated down the walk. Startled cries and loud commands lifted on the night air. The Englishman nodded, satisfied.

He left the parapet and started to cross the platform. At his right a huge metal object, glinting dull in the moonlight, at-

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tracted him. It was the Carthoun cannon. He stared thoughtfully. Grouped about its base, neatly stacked, were pyramids of forty-pound iron ball. He counted twenty. Powder kegs lined the left side of the tower rampart.

Suddenly he laughed and bent over and lifted a ball. He held it poised on the parapet a moment. The battering crew assigned to the main entrance had started again. He could see them outlined sharply against torch-light. They were far to one side, well out of d'Entreville's musket range.

Cleve shrugged. With an almost indifferent motion he brushed the cannon ball off the stone.

IT MISSED. But its purpose was obtained. The battering crew withdrew to a safe distance. The ball had plunged half its weight into the ground. The sight unnerved onlookers. For the first time in fifteen minutes, silence fell. A tense, confused silence.

Cleve picked up another cannon ball and waited.

A tiny figure burst the ring of men surrounding the base of the tower, and stepped into the clear. It was Beaucaire, half-dressed, still wearing a nightcap, and very angry.

"Ho! You in the bastion!"

D'Entreville's voice came back, easy, unruffled. "Good evening, *monsieur*. Have we disturbed you?"

"Disturb—*Sacre nom!* Come out and surrender! You cannot hope to fight off a whole garrison."

"But we can, *monsieur*."

In the tower, Cleve rested his chin on his fist and sighed. "We can try, my friend," he corrected.

Beaucaire shouted, "*Sangodemi!* You fools! You mad fools! It's a matter of minutes before my men break into the tower. Surrender now! Things will go easier with you!"

"You don't lie convincingly, *monsieur*. I think we shall stay here. Thanks all the same."

"This is your last chance to surrender!"

"*Pecaire!* If there is any surrendering to be done, *monsieur*—you had better do it to the Crown. And quickly!"

"Very well, then! Remember your words when I have you both on the rack!"

Beaucaire stepped back into the shadows. Cleve could hear him giving orders. A squad of men rushed toward the door. D'Entreville's musket cracked sharply. One of the men collapsed like a stringless puppet. The others came on.

Cleve arranged two more cannon balls beside the one he had already had posed. He waited until the battering crew was directly below; then pushed them off one by one. He didn't have to watch the result. The ugly thuds told everything.

A musket ball whined off the lip of the parapet. Two more followed it. Cleve ducked. He broke open a powder keg and reloaded his musket. He had expected this. The enemy would keep him blanketed with musketry while their comrades once more tried to crash the door.

He crawled to the trap door and slid down the stairs. There was a slitted loophole at his right. He inserted the musket and waited. Two hundred feet away rose the dim column of another bastion. A flame winked in it. Cleve smiled. He located the place and sent a shot tearing into it.

Somebody screamed. Below he heard the crash of a musket shattering on the ground.

He went back to the tower top and dropped three more balls on ambitious assault parties. Further attacks ceased, and a period of watchful waiting set in. It continued for more than an hour.

CLEVE frowned and went down to the tower room in the base. D'Entreville greeted him cheerfully. He had brought up more arms from the dungeon and they were scattered all over.

"I feel like a one-man army," said he, indicating them.

Cleve nodded. "You're going to have to act like one. The lads outside aren't sleeping, you know. They're up to something."

"I feel that, too. But, what? The game seems a stalemate at present."

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"Yes. It can't last. Have you checked the door leading to the dungeon from the armory?"

"Half an hour ago."

"Anything stirring?"

"No."

Cleve shifted uneasily. "I'll have a look," he said. "Keep your eyes open."

Guy rested three muskets across his knees. "They won't try anything. They still think you are up there in the tower."

Cleve laughed. He went below, down the shadowy corridor and past the cell which they had recently occupied. At the end of this passageway, a series of stone steps ran up to a large studded door.

Cleve inspected it thoughtfully. It led to the armory and was the only entrance which could not be defended externally. The fact that it was not being shivered by blows puzzled him.

He placed his ear to the wood. From the other side came vague murmurings and the sound of things being dragged. He sat down on a step and scratched his chin.

To his right was a dingy little cell, stacked high with powder-kegs. At his left was another. A series of stone steps, flanking those upon which he sat, staggered down to the depths. The dungeon was down there and crammed, he knew, with munitions.

"Faith!" he breathed. "We could blow the north wall—"

Suddenly he snapped his fingers. Now he knew what they were doing on the other side. They were clearing the armory of explosives. Then they would plant a charge—a small one, just enough to blast aside the six-inch door without endangering anything else.

With a curse he stood up, kicked heavily against the lower panel. "Ho! You on the other side!"

Sounds of labor ceased, and Beaucaire's voice rasped harsh and triumphant through the door. "Ah! Cleve. You desire surrender, eh? Well, it's too late! We'll blow down this partition and take you. Your death will not be quick, *monsieur*. Not after this! Cease begging!"

"I'm not begging, Beaucaire. I'm warning! Blow down this door and you'll be splattered from here to Paris."

The marquis laughed. "I have foreseen that, *mon ami*. For the past two hours my men have been removing the powder from this room."

"Very wise," Cleve snapped. "Only while you've been taking powder from your side, I've been piling it high on mine!" He paused, waited to catch the effect of the lie. When there was no reply, he decided to improve on it.

"Furthermore, m'lad, I have placed a lighted candle atop the whole conglomeration. The moment you jar this door in any way, the candle will fall into the powder. It will end our dispute, old boy—definitely. Frankly, you had better forget this entrance and try the others. It's safer!"

He heard Beaucaire choking blasphemies from the other side. There was quite an argument as to whether to believe the Englishman, or not. After a while, Cleve left the door. He'd heard enough.

"That'll hold them," he muttered.

He broke into a whistle and swaggered back to the tower room.

CHAPTER X

RAKEHELLY RESCUE

MORNING found him atop the tower. The past hours had been crammed. He was sodden with fatigue. Having abandoned the door to the armory as too risky, Beaucaire had resorted to other methods.

First, he'd sent a stream of men to scale the tower; another to assault the main door. Cleve had rimmed the parapet with cannon balls. The accuracy with which they dropped discouraged the enemy. The scaling party hadn't succeeded. Neither had the battering crew.

Then Beaucaire had tried to blow down the door. He sent men to plant powder in front of it. D'Entreville dropped the first four. And when a fifth succeeded, Cleve leaned over the parapet and doused the explosives with water. This had happened three times.

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Sitting beside the Carthoun in the rays of the newborn sun, the Englishman considered their position. They had battled the marquis to a standstill, but it couldn't last.

If Beaucaire succeeded in putting one more powder keg in front of the door, the game would be over. The defenders of the tower were out of water. Perhaps two cupfuls remained in the tank on the ground floor. Cleve shrugged.

"But, fortunately our friend doesn't know that."

In the base of the tower he could hear d'Entreville moving about. During the siege the Frenchman had composed a verse, and he was now trying to fit a tune to it. The results were not very satisfactory. And every now and then, he would stop in the middle of a note and curse.

Cleve smiled. Guy d'Entreville was a man of extremes. His emotions leaped from despair to hope, to indifference, to recklessness, and back to despair with the agility of a mountain goat.

Suddenly Cleve frowned. Above Guy's muffled tenor he had caught another sound. A sound from a distance. A rhythmic throbbing which pulsed faintly through the warm morning air. Martial. Stirring. He cursed. Drums! Military drums!

"Schomberg!" he cried. He had almost forgotten. He scrambled to his feet and a bullet whined off the rim of the parapet. The musketeers Beaucaire had placed in the neighboring bastion were alert.

He paid them no heed. Excitedly his eyes swept the western horizon. He saw it: a glint of steel in the sun; a thin plume of dust rising on the rim to his right. He turned and charged down the steps.

"They're coming!" he yelled, hurdling the last of the steps. "Egad! They're coming."

D'Entreville stood up. "Schomberg?"

"Yes!" Suddenly Cleve laughed. "I have an idea. Come upstairs."

He was gasping when they reached the tower-top again. He pointed in wordless emphasis at the thread-like columns marching out of the northwest.

The sound of drums was much louder now. The lookouts in other towers had caught it. Below the castle churned into feverish activity. The two defenders of the bastion were momentarily forgotten.

D'Entreville watched the old fashioned drawbridge being pulled up and turned to his companion.

"You said something of an idea?"

"Yes." The Englishman grinned and pointed to the Carthoun. "It will take two men to handle it."

Guy caught on and laughed. He made no comment. They swung into action. The cannon was heavy, unwieldy, and it took them ten minutes to roll it into position so that its muzzle pointed over the top of the portcullis.

At intervals Guy darted to the edge for a quick glance at the scene below. The base of the tower was deserted. For the time being, Beaucaire had forgotten them.

"I'll need deep deflection," Cleve decided, throwing aside a rammer and setting the first fuse. He reached down and picked up an armful of wooden jacks an hammered them clumsily between the breech and the carriage with a musket butt. "This brings me back to the year I served on a king's ship."

HE SIGHTED along the barrel. It ran in steep decline toward the center of the gate. The shot would be made at a thirty-degree angle. With Guy's aid he moved the Carthoun a trifle to the right.

He wanted ample opportunity to carom the ball off the gate and into the exposed hand-winch which had raised it.

"Keep your eye on the doors below, Kitten!"

He lit a match from one of the muskets. Guy nodded. He had been doing just that when he wasn't needed.

Cleve stepped aside. He touched the match to the fuse. Flame-pierced smoke enveloped the top of the bastion. The Carthoun strained back with a belching roar.

Dextrously Guy leaped forward, plunged a damp sponge into the muzzle. Cleve

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seconded with the rammer and a fresh charge. They were working swiftly, flawlessly. The wadding followed. Then the ball. Another wad.

"Ready!"

"Fire!"

From below astounded, dismayed yells soared into the air. A squad dashed for the bastion door. Guy was waiting for them. The Carthoun crashed for the second time. He dropped three balls and smashed two of the assault sortie and the rest withdrew.

Four shots were sent plunging into the gate. And then a new noise punctuated the yells of the garrison below. It was a sharper roar, not so deep as the Carthoun's rumble. The enemy had mounted an eighteen-pound culverin on the neighboring bastion. Its first ball struck the lip of the parapet. Guy brushed stone chips out of his hair and reached for a musket.

"*Corbac!* This is becoming too warm for comfort."

Cleve nodded. His fire had wrecked the winch. One of the gate-chains hung despairingly and the gate itself was leaning at a crazy angle. Another shot would bring it down.

He loaded the Carthoun by himself. Guy was busy dropping death notices on another assault party. Two more balls from the culverin jarred the tower. They were getting closer.

Finally Cleve stepped back and touched the match to the fuse. Through heaving billows of smoke he saw the gate reel. It started to fall. He gripped d'Entreville's arm.

"Come on, Kitten. Let's get out of here!"

At the bottom of the bastion they paused.

D'Entreville went to a loop-hole and glanced out. A squad was inching cautiously toward the door and he raised a musket, dropped a man and the rest retreated. He looked at Cleve.

"What now? *Mordi!* We've stirred up a hornet's nest."

The Englishman was triumphant. "But we've opened the door for Schomberg." He stepped up and peered through the loop-hole. "Yes. They're trying to build breastworks across the gate now, and—" He choked. "Damme! We must get out of here!"

The tower shuddered as another ball from the culverin hit it low. D'Entreville said, "Why?"

Cleve laughed. "Beaucaire has become smart. A squad has just dragged a Carthoun opposite this door. Two shots will blow it to splinters."

Guy stared through the loop-hole. He saw the gun being drawn; a hasty breastwork of earth being thrown up. For luck he sent a ball rapping toward it. Then he turned.

"Where to?"

"The armory. I have an idea that the door is not well guarded in all this excitement."

THEY trotted swiftly down the corridor between the tower room and the armory. At the great studded door they paused, lifted the iron bar and opened it softly. There were two guards on its other side and both were looking toward the noise in the bailey. They struck them simultaneously — d'Entreville with a clubbed musket; Cleve with the knife he had taken from the jailer. The guards hadn't a chance.

"Neatly and with dispatch," d'Entreville breathed.

Cleve nodded. On a shelf beside him was a box of candles. He dipped into it and withdrew one. Carefully he stripped tallow from it until there was only an inch left with the long naked wick dangling limply. Guy frowned. The Englishman held up the stub.

"This will burn for perhaps three or four minutes," he said. "Wait here. I'm going down into the dungeon, knock in the top of a powder keg and put this little invention atop it."

Then he was gone. D'Entreville heard him clatter down the steps. He bit his lip nervously. He bent down and took the

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rapiers from the belts of the two dead guards.

He stared at the layers of arms and ammunition piled at the far end of the armory. Soon someone would come to fetch it.

"*Sacre nom,*" he groaned, "why doesn't he return?"

Then Cleve was back. He wore a devilish grin. He gripped d'Entreville's arm, grabbed one of the swords, and said, "We have approximately three minutes to go somewhere else. The candle is burning in the center of several tons of explosives and when it burns low enough—" He laughed. "Come on!"

They darted furtively out of the door, along the wall and into a small garden which flanked the keep. Nobody stopped them. There was too much confusion. All eyes were concentrated on the tower.

In the garden Cleve and Guy paused to catch their breath. The past half-hour had been exhausting. They crouched beneath a heavy bush panting softly and smiling.

"Damme," Cleve said at length, "we have reached this far safely. Why not go the full way? Where do you suppose Beaucaire has stored the gold?"

A soft voice behind him said, "In the strong-room, Monsieur Cleve."

As one man the two cavaliers wheeled. Their swords gleamed. Ready. It was Beaucaire's sister, standing on the other side of the bush, unsmiling, serious.

"I watched you enter the garden from there," she said indicating a window. "I felt that you might need my aid."

Gallantly d'Entreville started to get up and bow. Cleve yanked him earthward. "Sit down, fool! Someone might see you." He looked up at the girl. "I am sorry that we bungled our escape, *mademoiselle.*"

"It was a brave bungle." She smiled. "Come. I will lead you to the strong-room. I have the keys here at my waist."

"The King shall hear of your loyalty, *mademoiselle,*" said Guy.

"I desire my brother's pardon. Nothing more."

SHE led them into the keep. The residence of the lord of the castle was quiet. The customary guards were gone, leaving the carpeted halls deserted.

Cleve paused at a window. He had been counting the time. It was nearing the point where the north wall would erupt if his invention worked. The girl and d'Entreville crowded behind him.

They were looking out into the main bailey directly across from the tower which he and Guy had defended. Even as he watched, the Carthoun which Beaucaire had been setting up roared. The heavy door to the bastion sagged. The girl murmured, "They still think you are in the tower, *messieurs.*"

Guy d'Entreville nodded. He too was waiting. Waiting to see the bastion, the wall, the armory, go up in thunder. Nothing happened. He looked at Cleve uneasily. Had the candle gone out?

Cleve shrugged. He stared bleakly into the bailey. Down there, in all his lace and finery, stood Beaucaire gesturing and shouting orders.

He kicked a slow powder-boy, slapped a gunner and stamped his foot at the delay. Finally the Carthoun vomited again, and the door in the bastion disappeared.

With a shout of triumph, Beaucaire drew his sword. He and fifty men charged forward, rushed into the tower room—and Cleve turned to Guy. The Englishman crossed his fingers and held them up. D'Entreville did the same thing.

Between them the girl stared bewildered. She did not understand. She didn't know. Almost pityingly Cleve drew her close.

"There are times, *mademoiselle*, when Fate creates a justice which—" But, looking into the soft luster of her eyes he suddenly discovered that he couldn't tell her.

"Yes, *monsieur?* You were saying—?"

And then it came! A monstrous roar which thundered over the castle in a great cloud of dust, smoke and flame. The impact shattered the glass of the window. There was a moment stunned by sheer force; then debris began to crash earthward.

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Great pieces of stone, parts of armor, earth-clods, twisted gory things that had been men. Through the holocaust Cleve felt her eyes probing him. Wide, horrified, stricken eyes. Incredulous.

"You knew! God! You knew and you didn't warn him. You didn't—" She broke down completely. Cleve held her. She clawed away. "Mazo!" she sobbed.

She fainted.

Cleve carried her to the divan; placed her gently upon it. He unhooked the key-ring she wore at her waist and stood staring. The tragic whiteness of her beauty killed all of the reckless triumph in him. The fool's luck in which he and Guy had played had had a price. The girl before him was paying it.

He felt suddenly humble.

"Damme!" he burst out savagely to Guy. "Come on! To the strong-room!"

The Frenchman nodded. He cast a glance out of the broken window. Where the bastion and armory had stood was now a great hole which gaped foolishly. Through it, breasting the slope, came the lily banners of the royal army.

"It's over," he said. "We've won! Beaucaire's men are throwing down their arms."

Cleve shrugged. "Come on," he said.

THE staff of Marshal Schomberg had taken over the keep of the castle when Beaucaire's sister recovered. She heard the sound of their voices, their laughing triumphant voices, coming from the strong-room at the end of the hall. Stifling the great aching void in her heart, she left the divan. From the treasure-vault, she heard Richard Cleve's voice.

"Le Duc de Montmorency left last night, *monsieur le maréchal*. Else he too would be captured."

A deep bass rumbled a hearty reply. "*Mordi!* You two must be wizards!"

"But this was not all of our doing," she heard Guy say.

"No? Then who else?"

"The Marquis de Beaucaire gave his life for his King, *monsieur*. When he, Cleve, and I arrived here with the treasure, we found that—that the castle had been betrayed. Without Beaucaire's valiant aid we would never have escaped from the cell in which Montmorency had us thrown."

"Precisely," Cleve's pleasant baritone seconded. "Le Marquis de Beaucaire was a brave, loyal subject. When all else seemed lost he seized a flaming torch, ran through a hail of bullets into the powder room, and blew himself and the north wall to bits so that you and your troops could enter safely. Such courage is rarely seen on this earth, *monsieur*. Le Marquis de Beaucaire should be honored forever."

Marshal Schomberg's bass voice replied emphatically. "And he shall, *messieurs!*"

And in the hall a slim girl turned away, her dark eyes glimmering. "Thank you, Monsieur Cleve and Monsieur d'Entreville," she whispered softly. "You have kept your word."

THE END

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The Old Yukon System

I see the wheel spin. There's a little better'n four thousand dollars in that pile, and it's all he's got

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE
Author of "McGee on Horseback," "A Ton of Gold," etc.

Two bits in the slot gets you nowhere; but the jackpot gives nuggets, thoroughbred horses, and a blonde. And No-Shirt McGee makes a small killing on his own

ME AND Bulldozer Craig are down at the Santa Anita race track in California watchin' the horses run, and wagerin' an honest dollar on the noses of likely lookin' nags. Bulldozer is more or less popeyed over seein' the big-shot movie stars in person.

And so am I, for us McGees have ever had a keen eye for pretty wimmin.

I keep thinkin' about the early days in Alaska where you bet on dog races and gambled at the roulette wheel and what not. Pretty soon I'm talking to Bulldozer about a couple of kids that hit Skagway about the time I did. We went on to Dawson together.

One was a tall, dark, broad-shouldered cuss that we nicknamed the Sure-Thing Kid. He had a roulette wheel along and he told everybody on the trail he was a square gambler.

"I don't figger to make a fortune," he said, "but I expect to make a stake of a hundred thousand dollars."

"Godelmightly!" half the boys yelled at the same time, "if a hundred thousand dollars ain't a fortune, what is?"

"Oh, four or five million dollars," the Sure-Thing kid answers. "I'm goin' to raise wheat and cattle on a big scale and on the side I'm goin' to breed horses.

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I'm goin' to keep breedin' 'em until I have the finest runnin' horses in North and South America."

"That'll pretty nearly be the world won't it?" somebody asked.

"Just about," he answers.

Everybody laughs. We was all kids in them days and we all had ambitions and hopes of doin' big things. And I don't suppose one in a thousand made the grade.

The Sure-Thing Kid had a pardner he'd picked up somewheres. He figgered to take a fortune out of the creeks, too. His goal was ten thousand dollars. We called him Two-Bit Tom, because two bits was the smallest sum of money in circulation in them days.

Two-Bit Tom was one of those kids who was raised carelessly. The kind that start somethin' big and then quit when it's about a fifth done because they bump up again' a obstacle of some kind.

Tom wanted to quit half way up the Chilkoot Pass, and he wanted to quit again when we had to whipsaw lumber for boats on Lake Bennett. He wanted to turn back when he saw what Miles Canyon and the White Horse Rapids was like.

But the Sure-Thing Kid liked him for some reason, and kept poundin' him on the tail. "Finish what you start," he said, "or you'll never amount to a dime. Raise your sights. Make a play for a million—not a miserable ten thousand dollars."

A lot of us wondered what the Sure-Thing Kid saw in Two-Bit Tom. He wasn't one to waste time or money on anything or anybody. We fin'ly concluded it was because Two-Bit Tom had a way with dogs and horses.

Many a pack horse would have gone wild and left his bones—and his owner's outfit—in Dead Horse Canyon, but for Two-Bit Tom's magic touch. He could calm the meanest. And it was the same way with dogs.

Well, the Sure-Thing Kid loved horses, and for that reason he must've figgered there was good in Tom. They talked horses on the trail a lot. They weren't talked out when they hit Dawson, either. But ten thousand dollars was still a lot of money in Two-Bit Tom's eyes.

THE Sure-Thing Kid opened up a little gambling place in Dawson and give Tom a job runnin' the wheel, while he, Sure-Thing, dealt faro.

Sure-Thing paid off Tom at the end of each shift and Tom immediately went over to the rival gamblin' houses and tried to buck their game. An hour later he'd be busted. The Sure-Thing Kid didn't like it.

"If you're goin' to lose your money," he growled, "why not lose it to me? You owe me that much. I'm tryin' to make somethin' out of you, and you won't let me."

"I ain't goin' to kill myself off shovelin' gravel into a sluice box if I can get my dust with a run of luck at some roulette wheel," Tom answers. "The trouble is, we don't see eye to eye. You want champagne, and I can have plenty of fun buryin' my nose in a schooner of beer."

"I'm from Kentucky," Sure-Thing said, "I know men. I know horses. And I appreciate beautiful women. I don't know what your family tree is like, but it prob'ly had a lot of dead wood on it that needed prunin'.

"But I can see one branch that's the real thing. Most of your ancestors were five-centers, which is five times less than two bits. But in the lot, there was a thousand-dollar bill. And that's the branch of your family tree I'm tryin' to cultivate. I thought I'd pruned off a lot of dead wood between Skagway and here, but it don't seem that way."

"I'm gettin' along," Two-Bit Tom argued sullenly.

"You got great talent, and I ain't goin' to see it wasted," Sure-Thing Kid snarls. "I ain't an easy man to discourage, and you are. So maybe somethin' will come of all this."

. . . Well, I'm tellin' Bulldozer about

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the Sure-Thing Kid and Two-Bit Tom when he growls, "Shut up, No-Shirt, and quit talkin' about a couple of short sports that probably died twenty years ago. Look at that car just drivin' up and parkin'. I'll bet there's twenty million dollars worth of motion-picture people in that one. That would hold your Sure-Thing Kid, I'll bet."

"It wouldn't," I answer. "He would figger to drive up *alone*, park beside them, and have people say, 'There's twenty million dollars worth of turfman and rancher.' "

"I'll bet Sure-Thing lowered his sights," Bulldozer says, "before he quit the Yukon country. And I'm bettin' too, that Two-Bit Tom found his ten thousand, was happy, and lost it. Hey, look at that car. It's a block long. That must be a big movie star."

There's a race-track tout standing' near, sizin' up the people as they park their cars, and pickin' suckers. "Movie actors hell," he says. "That's Colonel Talbot Crary, owner of the great Kentucky horse, Tanana. He's a favorite to win the Santa Anita handicap."

"There's a gent I'd like to meet," Bulldozer says, and for a minute it looks as if he'd climb the fence and introduce hisself to the colonel.

"Fat chance," the tout says. "You've got to talk horses or millions of dollars to meet the colonel, and you've got to talk fast. But I'll tell you somebody you can meet."

"Who?" Bulldozer asks, lookin' hopefully around. Then he gets kinda sarcastic. "Maybe I can meet the mug who just parked a flivver beside the colonel's car and took all the paint off'n one of his platinum fenders?"

We all watch a minute while the colonel gives the flivver driver hell. "When you are among gentlemen," the colonel is saying, "try to act like a gentleman. And not a five-center. When you park your car beside a gentleman's car, use a little sense, and don't ruin it."

"No," the tout says, when things have calmed down, "I don't mean you should meet the big, swarthy man in the little car. But go over to that hundred-dollar window and meet the gent behind the grill. Tell him you want to bet a hundred dollars on the seventh horse in the seventh race to win. Then come around after the race and tell me if I didn't give you a straight tip."

"I've been touted before," Bulldozer answers. "You'll be tellin' the next guy to bet on the sixth horse in the sixth race."

We've put on a little dog, bein' in the money, so we have box seats.

"I'VE been thinkin' things over," Bulldozer says. "Maybe the tout did have a straight tip on the seventh horse in the seventh race. I think I'll shoot a hundred bucks at that. I feel lucky."

"Chances are the sixth horse in the sixth race will win," I tell him. "But take a hundred along for me—right on number seven's nose in the seventh race. Then hurry back. I want to tell you some more about the Sure-Thing Kid and Two-Bit Tom."

"I don't want to hear it," he answers, "but I suppose I'll have to. When you get wound up you just have to run off at the mouth until you're run down. Hey look. Colonel Crary is up to his ears in beautiful wimmin."

I could see them filling his box. "That little blonde is a fetchin' number. I'd give a hundred dollars to park myself alongside of her."

"You're what the Sure-Thing Kid would call a tin-horn gambler," I tell him. "It should be worth a thousand dollars to set beside the blonde."

He wanders off, with a dyin' calf look in his eyes, and I quietly make a sneak from the box, too. I'm back before he is, and I'm all set to finish my yarn, when he joins me.

After the Sure-Thing Kid and Two-Bit Tom had been in Dawson awhile and had a couple of bust-ups because Tom wouldn't try to better hisself a prospector comes into Sure-Thing's gamblin' place. And he goes broke playin' the wheel.

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"I'll tell you what," the prospector says: "I'm too old to go back where this gold comes from. I'm too weak to handle money, too. They claim you recognize a sure thing when you see it. Well—let's find out."

'Sure," Sure-Thing says, "let's find out."

"I'll give you a map showin' you exactly where this gold come from, providin' you'll give me the price of a ticket home, and providin' you'll give me a quarter of the gold you take out of the creek. Or, better still, you invest my quarter in some kind of a trust fund where I can have only the income."

"Sounds reasonable," Sure-Thing answers. "I figgered to make my money gamblin' on the square. I didn't plan to buy any claims, or grubstake any miners. But this is different. How big a creek is it, and who knows about it?"

"It's a little creek, a couple of miles long. It drains into a swamp which drains into a river," the prospector answers. "It's a hell of a long ways into the mountains. And it takes plenty of courage to get there—or I'd go back. Prospectors naturally pass up the swamp, figgerin' it's just so much grief. That's why they haven't found the creek."

"How'd you find the creek?" Sure-Thing is cautious as usual.

"I was freightin' my outfit over the ice," the prospector explains, "and figgered the frozen swamp might be a short cut. I found where the creek emptied into it, so I thawed down through the ice and into gravel. I panned gravel and found gold. That was proof enough. I stayed there, thawin' and prospectin', until my grub run out. And here I am."

"It looks like a sure thing," Sure-Thing says. "It's a deal."

Well, he sends the old coot Outside and then he talks things over with Two-Bit Tom. Tom's got a weak mind and strong back, one of the first qualifications of a miner, even if he hasn't got the burnin' flame that drives a man on and on.

"We're goin' pardners," Sure-Thing says. "Here's the map the old fellow gave me. And this line right here is what he calls Swamp Creek. Now I want you to study this map until you can draw one just like it."

I SUPPOSE Two-Bit drawed fifty maps before he got one exactly like it. After that he could duplicate without any trouble. Then Sure-Thing throws the original map away.

"We don't want no map found on you if you get sick or hurt," he says. "The map's drawed on what passes for your brain.

"Now here's the deal. I grubstake you. You locate that creek, take out the gold and bring it to me. We deduct a fourth, which I'll invest for the old coot. And we split the rest fifty-fifty."

Two-Bit was down on his luck. His ten-thousand-dollar goal seemed farther away than the millions Sure-Thing was after. He grabbed the proposition and a couple of days later headed for the Swamp Creek country.

"Bein' the kind of a cuss he was Two-Bits had a hell of a time. He found a swamp emptyin' into a river, and decided that was it. The map he had in his head told him otherwise, but he sold hisself on the idear.

He lost a couple of months pushin' around the edge of the swamp. And when he did find the creek emptyin' into it, the gravel only had a few colors to the cubic yard.

He comes out that fall all smiles. "I struck it," he tells Sure-Thing. "The first creek was the wrong one, but the second creek was it. We're rich. We won't have to turn our hand again as long as we live."

"The gold you can carry in with one hand and not strain your muscles won't keep me in tips," Sure-Thing says. "Let's weigh it."

There was about five thousand dollars worth. Sure-Thing sneers. "If it wasn't for the fact you savvy horses and dogs, and they're my weakness," he says, "I wouldn't waste time on tryin' to make a big-time man out of you. Ain't you got no pride?

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Which would you rather do—ride around in a fine carriage, pulled by matched horses, and driven by a coachman? Or ride behind a plug pullin' a two-wheel cart?"

"What's the difference?" Two-Bits asks. "All either is, is transportation."

"Which would you rather train, then—a horse for a county fair race, or one for the Kentucky Derby?"

"Hell, anybody would rather train a thoroughbred," Two-Bits yelps. "You ask the damnedest fool questions."

"There's hope for you, then," Sure-Thing says. "And for that reason I'm givin' you another outfit and sendin' you back to dig that Swamp Creek gold. You didn't find it at all."

"I did too," Two-Bit argues. "I went through hell and I took out a fortune . . ."

"Chicken feed. Now look here." He displays two piles of nuggets. "This is the gold the old coot brought in from the real Swamp Creek. And this is what you tried to palm off on me. Can't you see there's a difference in color? Gold from different creeks looks different. Now get ready to hit the trail."

"Damned if I will. I've got my stake and I'm satisfied. It ain't ten thousand dollars, but twenty-five hundred is a lot of money," Two-Bits says.

"We bust up right here, then," Sure-Thing says. "It's certainly discouragin' to try and make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

"I'd sooner have the sow's ear purse," Two-Bit says. "It'd last longer."

He takes his half of the split and wanders around playin' this wheel and that. Luck is with him. Forty-eight hours later he's got eight thousand dollars. He wanders into Sure-Thing's place and runs his roll up to twelve thousand dollars.

"I think I'll quit the country," he says. "I've got enough to last a lifetime."

"You're smart," a half dozen bums tell him.

"You're a damned fool," Sure-Thing says, and his eyes narrow. "Crowd your luck some more."

NOW I happen to know Sure-Thing's wheel has a device on it that can make it crooked. Sure-Thing don't use the device, because he's a square gambler. But the first thing I know he's usin' it on Two-Bit Tom. *He's makin' him win.*

Tom looks at the growin' pile of chips and he can't believe his eyes. He cashes in, and heads to another place. "I'm lucky," he says, "and I'm goin' to ride my luck."

He runs his rolls up to twenty-five thousand dollars, and then all at once luck turns and the first thing I know he's busted again. He drops around to Sure-Thing's place and says, "How's a man goin' to get a meal when he's busted?"

"One way is to make a deal for a grubstake, and hit the trail for Swamp Creek," Sure-Thing answers.

"It makes me sick when I think how tough that country is," Two-Bit Tom says. "But I suppose I've got to take your proposition."

He's gone four months the next time, and when he comes back he's got twenty thousand dollars worth of dust. "I found the creek," he tells Sure-Thing, "and I cleaned it out."

"You yellow-bellied quitter," Sure-Thing snarls, "you found no such thing. Damn it to hell, if you'd summon a little spunk and find the real creek, you'd take out a hundred thousand dollars. Maybe more. The old coot who discovered the real Swamp Creek knew what was there. I get tired of writin' him you haven't struck it yet."

"You're sendin' him a fourth of what I'm bringin' in ain't you?" Two-Bit Tom asks.

"You know I'm not. You aren't takin' the pay from his creek, but one you discovered," Sure-Thing explains.

"It's too bad for him, then," Two-Bit Tom says. "I'm through this time. I've got my stake and some over. Ten thousand dollars will take care of me and I won't be as big a fool as I was before and gamble it."

"Good," Sure-Thing says. "But if you should gamble, give me a chance at it.

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You're in to me already for several thousand."

"I've learned my lesson," Tom says. "I'm through. This gold came too hard."

He walks away and Sure-Thing calls in a girl we've nicknamed Sunbonnet Mary because her name is Helen and she don't wear a sunbonnet. Or maybe it's because she looks like the picture of a girl called Sunbonnet Mary.

Mary exerts a strange influence on most males. They play around with her five minutes, and get delusions of grandeur.

"Bring Tom to my wheel," Sure-Thing says to Mary, "and I'll split whatever I win. It should be a good evening's work."

She looks at him a long time. "I thought you were a square gambler," she said, "and Tom was your friend and partner."

"I'm a square gambler," Sure-Thing answers. "And Tom's my friend and pardner with all his faults."

"Times are tough," she said, "and I'm not up here for my health."

Sunbonnet Mary was smooth. She asked Tom to buy her a drink and dance once or twice, then she got him interested in a dice game down at the Pastime.

He lost five dollars, then they went over to another place and he won a hundred at faro. She took him to a third place and got him interested in a roulette game. He lost a couple of hundred.

"Let's go over and take Sure-Thing for a couple of hundred and call it an evening," she said.

"Sure," he answers.

THEY start off easy, playing colors instead of numbers, and sometimes Tom loses and sometimes he wins. Sure-Thing is running the wheel hisself and he does a good job of it. "This is too slow," Mary says after awhile. "Play four numbers at a time."

Tom puts a stack of chips worth five hundred dollars so they'll be touching four different numbers. He loses. He tries again, and loses. He looks worried, then bets a hundred. He wins. He bets fifty and wins again.

"Ride your luck, Tom," Mary urges. "We've got him on the run."

Sure-Thing says, smooth as hell, "If you have a run of luck, Tom, I'll switch dealers on you." He calls his relief man. "Hang around, I may want you to take the wheel."

I'm there and I can see Tom glow all over. He tries a hundred dollars and wins. Then a fifty and wins. Then suddenly he shoves two thousand dollars worth of chips onto four numbers.

He loses.

The Sure-Thing Kid rakes in the chips and don't say a word. He knows Two-Bit Tom like a book. He knows what he's thinkin' and how he feels about things. He knows he's goin' to walk around the room with his hands in his pockets, stare at the wall a while, then come back.

And that's just what he does. He loses again. Mary is just drippin' sympathy and she's quite sure his luck will change. Tom hangs on until he's got only five thousand in dust left.

Did you ever see a man fight his luck? If you've gambled any even at craps, penny ante, or even bridge at a hundredth of a cent a point, you know what it's like.

Two-Bit Tom had his neck bowed when he bought another thousand dollars worth of chips. He shoved in his gold, it was weighed out, and he carries the chips over to the table. He ain't sayin' a word, but he plays cautiouser. But it seems like when he makes small bets he wins. And when he makes big bets he loses.

"That's because you're a natural borned cheap skate," Sure-Thing says. "If you figgered a fortune was several million instead of several thousand, you'd have the right thoughts when you gamble, and winnin' a big bet would be as easy as winnin' a little one.

"Take me now. I want the finest horses and carriages. I want diamonds in my cuff links and stuck in the front of my boiled shirt."

"Aw shut up," Two-Bit Tom snarls.

But Sure-Thing had him on the run, and he kept him movin'. "I live a clean life

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and fortune smiles on the gambler who lives a clean life and holds pure thoughts . . ."

I've crowded my luck, too. I know Tom has a funny feelin' in the pit of his stomach. I know, too, his horse sense tells him to quit, but a stronger force is pullin' him back to the wheel. You've felt it, just the same as I have. A still, small voice is sayin', "If you quit loser, you'll have to go back to the creeks again. Bad luck can't last forever. Now maybe the next turn of the wheel will bring luck your way."

Tom is waverin', and I see Sure-Thing give Mary a knowin' look. He's sayin', "Now's the time for the kill. Don't forget we're splittin' the take."

Just a faint smile plays around her lips for a moment; then she says, "Tom, I've a hunch. Let's break the bank."

"I've had a hunch," Tom says. "And I'm goin' to break the bank."

He didn't have any kind of a hunch. I know it, and you know it. All he had was the urge to beat his hard luck. He'd been fightin' his luck and he wanted to lick it. All he needed to be pushed all the way was someone to say a word to build up his confidence.

He cashed every ounce he had and came back to the table. "The works goes on number seventeen," he says. "On seventeen."

There's a little better'n four thousand in the pile, because Mary, to hold Tom's faith and maybe ease her own conscience, adds some of her own money.

I SEE Sure-Thing spin the wheel. He watches it revolve, and the ball dance; then Sure-Thing's leg pushes lightly against the cash drawer. It in turn engages the mule's ear, a needle that emerges from a groove and kicks the ball away from number seventeen.

The ball comes to a stop and there's silence in the room. "Tough luck, Tom," Sure-Thing says. "Well, let's have a drink on the house."

"I don't want a damned thing on the house," Tom snarls. "I want my head examined." Then he clears out, leavin' Mary stranded.

"Sure-Thing," Mary says when she gets her cut, "this is the first and last time in my life I'm in on a frame-up."

"And this is the first and last time in my life I'll have anything to do with a crooked wheel," Sure-Thing answers. "But you must remember it was for the good of Tom's soul. I'm tryin' to teach him two things—not to quit at the first obstacle and to cultivate a taste for the finer things in life."

"What're you going to do with the five thousand you took from him?" Mary asks.

"It's going into the pot that will eventually get me several million, and one of the finest racin' strings in America," Sure-Thing explains.

"You see I'm in hopes to fire Tom with enough ambition and determination so he'll want to help me develop a Kentucky Derby winner, instead of a county fair winner. What're you goin' to do with your split?"

"Put in into a hard-rock proposition I am developing," she answers. "As I said before, I'm not up here for my health. I'm here for a start."

It wasn't long after that Two-Bit Tom comes around to Sure-Thing's place. "Well, I guess we'll have to go in pardners again," he says. "I ain't got my ten thousand. Give me an outfit and I'll try and find that old coot's Swamp Creek."

Two-Bit Tom is a different man when he starts out. There're plenty of swamps along the way, but he ain't even tempted to turn off. He comes to a place at last that is like the one the old coot described. He turns, and heads across the swamp. The ice breaks under him and he goes down to his armpits in the coldest slime you ever saw.

It's enough to discourage the toughest man. And Tom ain't the toughest. But he gets out, makes his way to a thicket and scrapes hisself off.

He takes small trees and splits them into a boat frame, and he covers the frame with a tarp he's brought along. He loads

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dogs and outfit into the canvas boat and fights his way through the swamp.

There're stretches where he has to unload and pack everything, even the dogs. Other stretches where he can hardly force the boat through the muck.

But fin'ly he reaches a little creek, runnin' bank-full with ice. There're mountain sheep grazin' nearby and he knocks off several. As soon as the stream clears he catches enough fish to keep his dogs goin' awhile.

He finds the old coot's camp, mostly a brush shelter and blackened rocks where he'd built his fire. He whipsaws lumber for a sluice box, then he starts shovelin' in.

THERE'S no halfway business about him. He goes up the creek leavin' tailin's and scraped bedrock behind him. When summer's half gone, he's taken out just five thousand dollars' worth of dust and nuggets.

A year ago he'd've turned back. But he's mad. He's fightin' his luck, you see. And besides, the old coot had said there was a pocket somewheres on that creek. He'd struck one, but not the big one, and that was what Tom was after.

He'd shovel away, cussin' and swearin', and sayin', "So I'm a two-bit man, huh? I'll show 'em. And specially I'll show that blasted, smooth dude so-and-so of a Sure-Thing."

Snow was beginnin' to fly and he was fighting icy water and freezin' gravel when he hits a natural dike. It looked to him as if the dike might have stopped most of the gold flowin' down from the gulch above.

He wasn't feelin' none too good, on account of not havin' fresh vegetables. His teeth was gettin' loose, and there was other signs of scurvy. "I'll go down to bedrock, anyway," he snarls. "I'll show 'em."

The freeze come two weeks later, and in ten days' time he could travel over the swamp ice. He found the river was still open, and runnin' fast, though plenty of slush ice covers the surface.

He goes back for the canvas boat. Water transportation is easier'n runnin' behind a dog sled. And besides he was feelin' pretty sick and didn't want to wait for the river to freeze.

He comes down the river in five days, and the last day he was breakin' ice through the shallows and where the water run slow.

I was in Sure-Thing's place when Tom arrives. His face is covered with beard and his hair is hangin' almost to his shoulders. His eyes are sunk, but they've got a hard light in 'em.

He drops a six-thousand-dollar poke of gold on the bar. "Take a look at that, you so-and-so, and see if I found the old coot's Swamp Creek *this* time."

Sure-Thing don't even need to compare the gold with that he got from the old coot. "Yes, you've hit it," he said. "Where's the rest of it?"

"Down in the boat—three hundred thousand dollars worth. Nearly a ton, figgered at fifteen dollars an ounce," Tom answers. "And somebody better keep a watch out for the dogs. The boat wouldn't hold 'em, and they're comin' down the river bank."

"You'll want a bath, and some decent grub . . ." Sure-Thing commences to say.

"Yes," Tom answers. "And then I'll want to sleep a week or so. You take care of the gold. See that the old coot gets his quarter. And take care of my half of what's left, too. First thing I know I'll be gettin' big-shot gambler ideas and losin' it at some crooked wheel."

"Anything else?"

"Do you still figger to buy a ranch and start raisin' wheat, cattle, and good horses?"

"Yep," the Sure-Thing Kid answers. "That's why I came here. Now I've got a stake there's nothin' to keep me."

"Toss my half into the pot and give me a job trainin' your nags," Tom says.

"What'll you train 'em for?" Sure-Thing asks.

"I know what you're thinkin', but you're wrong," Tom says. "I won't train 'em for anything less'n the Kentucky Derby."

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He grins. "I'm through with two-bit things. It cost me ten thousand, but that night me and Mary played your wheel, opened my eyes to the thrill of big things.

"But I'm through bettin', which maybe don't make sense to you, but makes plenty of sense to me."

"And plenty of sense to me, Tom," Sure-Thing answers.

WELL, as I finish tellin' Bulldozer about the Sure-Thing Kid and Two-Bit Tom, he reminds me of the fact the seventh race has just been won, and the seventh horse didn't win.

He gives me an accusin' glare like it was my fault.

"If I'd've bet on the sixth horse in the sixth race, though, I'd have been a thousand dollars to the good. Say, what become of the Sure-Thing Kid, Two-Bit Tom and Mary?"

"Sure-Thing and Tom are worth several million between 'em, and Tom's trained one Kentucky Derby winner already. Chances are he'll breed a Santa Anita handicap winner before he's through with it," I answer. "He don't bet. He got it out of his system up in Alaska, so he can put his whole mind onto trainin' his horses."

"And Mary?"

"Her hard-rock proposition is still producin'," I answer. "She must be worth a million. That blonde you've been ravin' about is her daughter. The quiet, dignified woman with the white hair settin' behind her is Mary."

"And you ain't tellin' me Colonel Talbot Crary is the Sure-Thing Kid?" Bulldozer yelps.

He's gapin' like a fella that's just seen his first hundred-dollar bill.

"That's him," I answer. "And the cuss in the flivver who scraped the finish off'n Crary's fender is Tom. He never got his sights raised a hundred percent. He still uses an inexpensive car, but his family ride around in a job like Crary's. Come on, Bulldozer, we'll go over there now and meet 'em."

"Just my luck," Bulldozer moans. "Here I'm bustin' to buy that blonde a sandwich and a cup of coffee, and I bet on the wrong horse."

"Well, I didn't," I tell him. "I took your hunch and bet on the sixth horse in the sixth race."

And with that I shove ten century-notes into Bulldozer's hand and lead the way to Sure-Thing's box.

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Captain Vromer raged like a trapped bear as Dixon lashed him down in the berth

By CARL RATHJEN

Author of "Crash Man," "Two Steps from Hades," etc.

Fairweather Skipper

Gray hairs spring up fast with a falling barometer—and here's one sailor who spent twelve years hoping for both

PETER DIXON lingered inside the Liverpool pier until the well-decked freighter *Southern Pride* was almost ready to sail; then he picked up his bag and strode determinedly toward the gangplank. The tall man, with eyebrows that looked like black grease smudges, straightened with a frown from the port rail as Dixon stepped on deck.

"You ain't the new first, Pete?" Hank Beecher, the chief engineer, muttered incredulously, extending a grimy hand.

Dixon's gray glance became as brittle as slate.

"Why not?" he demanded. "I never thought *you* would turn against—"

Beecher still held his hand out.

"You ought to know me better than that!" he protested.

"Sorry, Hank," said Dixon, grasping his hand. He nodded his blond head toward the bridge. "I hear Captain Vromer's a pretty square sort."

Beecher looked away. "Pete, I know what you've been through since were were on the *Pacific Pride* together five years ago. I wish I could say what you want me to. That the Old Man will give a guy a

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break. That he's feeling good because he's getting command of the Line's new ship just launched at Port Newark. Any other day that would be so, Pete. They don't come squarer than the Old Man. But it don't hold today. We just got word the owner is sailing with us. And the Old Man classes all owners at sea as agents for Davy Jones. So you can see—"

Dixon picked up his bag. "I'd better report then before he stews himself too much."

Beecher grasped his arm. "I know you need a break, but you won't get it this trip with the owner stepping on the Old Man's toes. Why don't you beat it ashore, Pete? Phone in to the office that you're sick or something, and get yourself assigned later to some other—"

Dixon tightened his grip on the bag. "Hank, I've been with the Line twelve years. The past five years have been—well, I've been juggled about like a hot penny. Captain Vromer is the only skipper in the Pride fleet I haven't sailed under. This is my last chance to—"

Beecher nodded glumly. "Well, good luck to you then. You can count on me as one friend aboard. And while we're at it, you might as well get all the bad news. Mr. Hanlon, the second, won't be welcoming you. He stepped down from the first two years ago to get this berth with the Line. He's hoping to have his master's ticket soon and get command when the Old Man leaves to take the new ship."

Before Dixon could leave, a rotund little man, in a brown sack suit cleverly cut to streamline his bulges, marched up the gangplank. His button brown eyes, behind the rimless glasses, disapproved immediately of Dixon and Beecher.

"I'm Brady, the owner," he announced. "Haven't you men work to do to clear this ship? One of you tell the captain that I'm aboard and he can sail in five minutes. One of you get someone to come down to the pier and bring my luggage aboard."

He bustled down the gangplank. Beecher scowled at Dixon.

"If you're still set on sailing, you'd better see the Old Man before Little Napoleon starts his campaign to conquer the bridge."

Evidently Captain Vromer, a stocky gray head with a chest that had not sagged to his abdomen, did not know about Dixon's reputation, or else he was being very understanding.

"Twelve years you been with the Pride Line, eh?" he said, his clear blue eyes approving Dixon.

"That's right," replied Dixon, knowing the captain expected him to say more about himself. "It's close to sailing time," he suggested. "I'll put my bag below and—"

The Old Man nodded. "Just a moment," he said. "The new dang-fangled owner of the Line is sailin' with us. A landlubbin' owner at that," he growled. "Just remember, no matter what he says to you, you take your orders from me. I want no trouble this trip." Captain Vromer turned toward the port wing where the pilot was smoking a pipe and chatting with the second mate. "Mr. Hanlon," the captain called, "come in and get acquainted with our new first mate."

MR. HANLON was a skinny sort of man with a big Adam's apple. His heavy dark eyebrows, hollowed cheeks, and deep sunburn gave him a moody appearance.

"Dixon?" he murmured after the introduction, his glance side-stepping Dixon's. "You wouldn't be the man they call Fairweather Dixon, would you?"

Captain Vromer, who had turned to leave the bridge, stopped abruptly.

"What's that?" he demanded. He came back slowly. "Are you Fairweather—"

Dixon pulled his hard gaze off Mr. Hanlon and matched the Old Man's stare.

"I am," he admitted stonily, "but if you knew the circumstances, sir, you'd know it's just a harmless—"

"Harmless!" Vromer barked. "A man no skipper would trust alone on the bridge in a blow? A man who gets himself trans-

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ferred from ship to ship to avoid dirty weather, gets out of the North Atlantic each fall before the gale season starts and—"

"If you examined that reasonably," Dixon retorted, "you'd realize that no man could foretell far enough ahead before a ship left port where a blow would strike."

"You was christened Fairweather then, I suppose," Captain Vromer snapped. "You ain't goin' to deny you've shifted from ship to—"

"I'm trying to explain that," Dixon persisted hotly. Five years of this was getting to be too much cargo, and his temper, like a ship loaded beyond her Plimsoll marks in heavy weather, was becoming stubborn and unmanageable. "The shifting about has been none of my doing," he insisted. "The company records will prove I've never applied for transfer from any ship. But in my earlier years with the company it saw fit to shift me about. It was just one of those unaccountable actions the office never feels called upon to explain, but just the same it strangely did deny me the dubious privilege of ever coming through any but comparatively mild storms at sea. Things just haven't happened to me. Why should that be held against me? People don't think there's any discredit to a man who's worked in a bank twelve years and never come face to face with a holdup, so why should I—"

"The sea's different," the Old Man interrupted. "Anybody can be a fair weather sailor; even a landlubber can get away with mistakes in that kind of weather. A man ain't fit to command a ship or even be first mate if he ain't grown a few gray hairs in dirty weather."

"I'll be ready to grow mine when the time comes," snapped Dixon.

"You'll not sail with me!" roared Captain Vromer. "Your explanation is smooth, Mr. Fairweather Dixon; a little too studied out if you ask me. A title doesn't stick to a man unless other men feel there's some good reason for—"

"That title started as a friendly joke," flared Dixon. "Then someone with a queer warp to his sense of humor added a few nasty ideas of his own, the suggestion that I *applied* for transfers to avoid dirty weather. If you're the sort of man who accepts hearsay evidence like that, then it's time I corrected my first impression of—"

"Hold on," barked Captain Vromer.

That always got them when the attack was shifted to themselves. He would sail with them and they would make no protest to the office; they would watch his work and could find no criticism. But the opportunity never came to show he could stand up and meet trouble at sea, and so they were always suspicious of him and had him transferred to another ship the first chance they had. And if Vromer still refused him now, he was finished with the Pride Line.

The pilot was knocking the dottle from his pipe and coming inside.

"Looks like we're set, Captain," he said with a wry smile. "Your owner just told the third to have the gangplank drawn off."

Captain Vromer scowled at his watch and muttered under his breath. Dixon waited desperately. He glared at Mr. Hanlon who kept his gaze carefully focused on a gull vigorously exploring its feathers on the ridge of the pier shed. Down in the slip two tugs panted forward to nuzzle against the freighter. Captain Vromer looked at his watch again and swore.

"All right, Mr. Dixon," he jibed. "With the owner aboard I could stand lookin' forward to some fair weather this trip. Get into your workin' clothes."

Smarting under the jibe, Dixon left the bridge. New Orleans, the first port the *Southern Pride* would touch, was a long way off. A lot might happen for the good before then, he hoped. But at supper that night he learned just how much of a break he could expect.

DURING the afternoon Mr. Brady, who had donned a new white yachtsman's cap that should have foundered

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under its cargo of oak leaf, proceeded to display his ignorance of navigation and at the same time expressed his opinion of how the ship should be run. No one, from bridge to engine-room and all parts in between, fore and aft, had escaped his questioning glance and critical tongue.

"Captain," he said at supper, "and this goes for everyone, I want you all to forget that I'm the owner. What I'm getting at is that I want to feel I'm a part of this crew. So I wish you'd tell me just what you'll expect of me as a crew member if we should encounter bad weather."

Captain Vromer, whose features all afternoon had played a grim tug-of-war between open rebellion and stoical explanation of Mr. Brady's errors in suggestion for conducting the affairs of the ship, raised his blunt eyebrows.

"The best thing anyone can do who isn't up on his sea work," he declared, obviously struggling to contain himself while his sharp gaze glanced off Mr. Brady and thrust at Dixon, "is to stay below and out of the way in dirty weather and let men who know how take care of the ship. That's all I'll expect of you, Mr. Brady," he said, still looking at Dixon.

Out on deck after supper while a sinking sun red-leaded the restless swells, Dixon met Hank Beecher.

"Well," he muttered. "I might as well face it, Hank. I've put in twelve years with the Pride Line just to work myself onto the beach."

"Keep your chin up," encouraged Beecher. "The Old Man ain't himself. No one is after this afternoon. As soon as the blisters he got from Brady turn to callouses you'll find he's all right. Forget what he said at supper."

"Five years have taught me to know all the symptoms too well," declared Dixon.

"If the Old Man really wanted to bear down on you," said Beecher, "wouldn't he have tried to get back at Brady by telling what he thought of the first mate the Liverpool office had sent him?"

"Might be something to that," Dixon admitted.

And then a few days later, the heavy rainstorm peppered across the sea just as he went up to take over the bridge for the first dog watch, and almost on his heels Captain Vromer followed. A few minutes later, Mr. Brady appeared. His face was puffy with raw sunburn. He had fallen asleep on the upper deck the previous afternoon and everyone, glad of the respite from his prying about, let him sleep and bake and bake. Now he wanted the captain to come below and find some lotion which the steward was unable to locate in the captain's first-aid kit.

"Sorry, not now," said Vromer. Brady began to insist and Vromer blew up.

"Which is more important?" he barked. "Your sunburn or the safety of the ship? If you'd seen that I'd gotten a reliable first mate . . ."

The distorted story of Fairweather Dixon poured from the Old Man like the rain water racing down in the scuppers. Dixon, his blunt face tingling, took it in silence. What was the use of denying it now? If Vromer would not accept his story what chance was there that Brady would? But more than that, he kept his silence because he had one hope left. Maybe the Old Man had not really meant to let himself go. Maybe he was the sort of skipper who keenly felt his responsibility and came on the bridge for even the mildest of rain squalls. So Dixon waited quietly.

Came time for the second dog watch and rail still splattered against the windows. Mr. Hanlon arrived to take over from Dixon and the captain reached for his oilskins. Dixon knew then his last hope had been in vain.

He started to leave the bridge at the same time as the captain.

"Mr. Dixon," the Old Man called sharply. "It's customary to make your entry in the log before leavin' the bridge."

"*My* entry, sir, for *your* watch?" Dixon retorted, sliding the door back with a bang and leaving the bridge without his oilskins.

His action was wrong, he knew, very wrong. But what did it matter? He was finished with the Pride Line.

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HE was too tense with anger to force supper down. When he went to the bridge for his next watch the squall was gone, so he did not see the Old Man again until he discovered him lying on the deck outside his cabin the next morning. Dixon ran to him, and a sympathetic pain tingled through his skin when he saw the splintered end of bone thrusting through the captain's trouser midway between the ragged cuff and baggy knee.

Glass glinted on the deck and there was a smear of some oily substance with a long skid where the captain's foot had slipped. The Old Mans eyelashes meshed tightly in silent combat with pain. Perspiration glistened in the large pores of his rawhide face. He opened his eyes as Dixon knelt beside him.

"Brady's sunburn lotion, ain't it?" Dixon looked at the label on a fragment of glass and nodded. The Old Man swore. "Damn all owners! Give me a hand," he gasped.

Dixon held him gently down. "Lie still. I'll have to splint that leg temporarily before I dare move you."

Dixon started to get up, and then the sudden realization walloped him with pain in the solar plexis. With the captain disabled, he was now in complete command of the ship!

He poised there in a half-crouch and stared down at the Old Man. He might have felt triumph over him, but he didn't. There was just that numbing realization and the ripple of a sudden worry across his confidence that, after all these years of waiting, he might fail now that his time had come.

The leg was splinted. The ragged wound was cleansed, roughly stitched and bandaged. Captain Vromer, never having known a day abed for illness or injury in his life, raged like a trapped bear as Dixon held him down in the berth with a forearm across the hard chest and lashed him in with a length of line. Mr. Brady spluttered incoherently for the moment in indignation. Mr. Hanlon and Hank Beecher watched the struggle in silence.

"I'll have you broken for this," roared the Old Man, shouting in Dixon's face. "Mr. Hanlon, Beecher," he barked. "You heard me before. Put this man in irons and carry me to the bridge."

"You've got to stay here," Dixon insisted, pulling the line across the captain's twisting torso. "You've got a compound fracture and you can't risk infection or aggravating it. I've been in touch with a physician aboard a liner. His orders are—"

"His orders be damned!" shouted the Old Man. "I'm master of this ship. There's dirty weather ahead and I'll not be trustin' the likes of you alone on the bridge. You fairweather sailor!"

Beecher, whose watchful eye and brawny frame dispelled any rash thoughts Mr. Hanlon might entertain about tackling Dixon, spoke up.

"Aw, listen, Cap," he said."Pete—Mr Dixon's only doing this for your own good." He waited until the Old Man stopped swearing about gray hairs. "If you ask me, you wasn't born with your gray hairs. Cap—"

"No one's askin' you," stormed Captain Vromer. "Dixon," he began.

"It's no use, Captain," declared Dixon. "You're staying here whether or not you like it that my time has come to grow a few gray hairs." He dodged the sudden upthrust knee of the Old Man's sound leg and pushed it down and strung the line over it.

Mr. Brady stepped closer.

"See here, Dixon," he protested in a voice that trembled with anger and near-panic. "The barometer's dropping! There's a terrible storm coming! We need Captain Vromer on the bridge, a man who is fully qualified to—"

"I didn't find my first mate's ticket," Dixon replied curtly, "nor did I bribe my way for the master's ticket that should be mine when we reach New Orleans."

Mr. Brady waved a lividly sunburnt hand toward the berth.

"You've absolutely no right to do this. Unless you stop instantly I'll summon the crew to—"

"You seem to forget they're taking

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orders from me now," Dixon countered, tightening the last knot.

"I'm still master here," the Old Man raged impotently.

"Don't forget I'm the owner," Mr. Brady snapped.

"Have you let us?" Dixon retorted, and Mr. Brady's raw sunburn looked more crimson than ever.

"You're fired!" he shouted. "Mr. Hanlon, I place you in full charge of—"

"We're at sea," Dixon barked. "Regardless of your wishes I'm automatically in command. So if you've got anything to say, save it until we're in port."

Behind him the Old Man was strangely silent. Dixon started to leave the cabin, but stopped and turned.

"I'm sorry, Captain, but you didn't give me any other choice." He faced the second mate. "Mr. Hanlon, see that the crew is informed I'll put any man in irons who touches those lines without my orders."

HE looked at Mr. Brady and left the cabin. The wind had freshened out of the south and a grayish-green sea humped high off to starboard and slid aft. Thunder muttered in the distance. Dixon paused on the ladder to the bridge as Hank Beecher, an uncertain smile clinging desperately for a hold on his greasy worried face, overtook him.

"Don't say it, Hank," he said uneasily. We're not in port yet."

Beecher forced a laugh and swept his arm deprecatingly.

"What are you trying to tell me? That you're losing your—your— Hell, don't you start believing in that fairweather business now! You can't let yourself down after you've waited five years for this. Good luck, Pete, I'll be standing by below if you need me."

"Thanks, Hank," said Dixon, raising a hand to the back of his neck to try to rub away the tight feeling. He went on up to the bridge. Young Mr. Allen, the third, turned inquiringly.

"How's the Old Man, Mr. Dixon?"

"I've got him lashed down for the blow."

Mr. Allen started. "Lashed?" he began, then, remembering that third mates are supposed to be seen but not heard too much, he turned in confusion and peered at the barometer.

"Still dropping," he said.

Dixon braced his hands far apart on the rail below the forward windows. Sunlight spangled the spray leaping out from the bow. Whitecaps scarred the swells fleeing before the advance of the dark blue smudge seeping over the western horizon.

The blow arrived shortly after the afternoon watch began. There were a few strong gusts of wind that tugged experimentally at the superstructure, a splattering of rain against the windows like a handful of flung shot; then with a blare of wind and a roll of thunder the real attack commenced. The seas reared toward the sullied sky and hurled themselves at the *Southern Pride*. There was almost a constant cascade from the forecastle to the well-deck.

It was along toward eight bells of the afternoon watch when Dixon spied the giant grayback looming over the seas ahead. There was no time to ring down the engines from the half-speed that kept the freighter from pounding too hard through the lesser seas. All he could do was grip the rail and wait as the smoking grayback towered over the forepeak.

Tons of marble-green water surged aboard over the Number One Hatch on the forecastle and crushed thunderously down on the Number Two in the well-deck. The freighter faltered and below the bridge there was a smashing impact that flung Dixon against the window in spite of his bracing. A thick curtain of white water shot high above the bridge.

A lesser sea, piling aboard while the *Southern Pride* groveled under her burden of water, narrowly missed slamming the bridge with full force. Dixon heard the splintering of the port lifeboats being torn away. For a moment he thought the freighter was beaten. She was still buried by the stem, but she tottered up with solid water pouring overside from the well-deck. Wind howled about the bridge. A sharp

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spur of lightning goaded the heaving flanks of the sea. The freighter started to fall off into the trough.

Dixon whirled toward the helmsman.

"Can't hold her, sir!" the helmsman shouted. "She hasn't recovered enough to give me steerage way to—"

Dixon jumped for the engine-room telegraph to signal for more speed. But even as he grasped it the ship began tilting to starboard. He jockeyed the telegraph frantically. There was a jarring shock as a sea rammed the port bow and swung the freighter around more. There was a tremor as the engines speeded up.

But it was too late.

The freighter shuddered as a heavy sea broadsided her. She went over toward her beam ends. From below came the ominous rumble of shifting cargo. Dixon felt his scalp tighten. Gray hairs taking root, he thought. He clung to the telegraph to keep from sliding across the steeply sloping bridge. He barked at the helmsman.

"Keep her hard over."

The *Southern Pride* struggled sluggishly around. A sea rolled up the inclined port side and waterfalled across the listing well-deck. She started toward her beam ends again, then bashed her bow through a crest with an explosion of spray and straightened head on to the seas as she plunged to the trough.

"Steady as she goes," Dixon ordered in a strained voice, feeling as if that were the first time he had let his breath out since the giant grayback had struck. He signaled the engines down to half-speed. There was still a nasty list, and down on the fore-deck he discovered the giant grayback had swept away the ventilators to either side of the mast and Number Two Hatch was just a gaping hole.

Mr. Brady, his startled eyes blinking through his wet glasses, scrambled onto the bridge.

"For God's sake, Dixon!" he cried. "Now will you get Captain Vromer up here? Do you realize what will happen," he shouted, "if another wave like that is permitted to—"

"I'm aware of the situation," Dixon interrupted. "And Captain Vromer still stays below. He couldn't have prevented that sea from boarding us any more than—"

"Don't try to crawl out from under," Brady barked. "You—"

Mr. Hanlon, followed by white-faced young Mr. Ames, dashed up the slope of the bridge from starboard.

"Mr. Allen," Dixon commanded. "Get below and inspect the holds. Mr. Hanlon, take some men and timber and tarpaulin Number Two Hatch."

The third mate ran from the bridge but Mr. Hanlon remained where he was.

"I'm staying up here," he declared. "You tend to the hatch. It's about time you got wise to yourself, Mr. *Fairweather* Dixon."

MR. BRADY started to nod approvingly. Dixon, fighting his temper, stepped toward the second mate.

"Mr. Hanlon," he snapped. "I'm not in the habit of having to repeat my orders."

Mr. Hanlon looked at him, quickly averted his gaze in search of support, and finding none but Mr. Brady who stood carefully out of the way, suddenly decided to follow Mr. Ames.

"See here, Dixon," Mr. Brady blustered.

"Captain Vromer stays below," said Dixon, signaling the speed down to barely steerage way to keep seas from boarding the ship while the men worked down on the well-deck. He stepped to the speaking tube and ordered Beecher to pump out the Number Two Hold and try to trim the list from the ship with the ballast tanks.

He broke his pacing to glance at the unpromising barometer; then looked at the chart. A long way to the Gulf and New Orleans. He suddenly remembered Mr. Brady's watchful presence and stopped his uneasy pacing. Mr. Brady's eyes narrowed.

"Listen, Dixon," he bargained. "I said I'd discharge you, but I'll reconsider that if you'll release Captain Vromer."

Dixon looked at him. "I've hung on for five years when everyone's been against me," he said. "I don't quit in the middle of a job."

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Mr. Brady stamped from the bridge.

Night, rushing out of the East to join forces with the pall of the storm, made a backdrop of darkness that increased the vividness of the lightning flashes. Mr. Allen reported to Dixon. It was mostly the shifted crates of English midget autos that were holding the ship in her list.

"Mr. Hanlon superintended their stowing," he added.

Hank Beecher came up as Hanlon and the men finished repairing the hatch and Dixon signaled for more speed from the engines.

"About all I can trim her off," Beecher scowled. "Still pretty nasty, ain't it? About nine degrees I'd say."

The steward, the wind plastering his oilskins about him, came onto the bridge.

"The Captain's leg is pretty bad, sir," he reported. "When the ship heeled over he must have strained it against the lines that lashed him. The splints have slipped and the wound is open again. He's in considerable pain."

Dixon frowned and turned to the third mate.

"Take over here, Mr. Allen. And remember you take your orders only from me. Keep her steady as she goes."

He hurried below.

When he returned, Hanlon and Brady were on the bridge. He walked to the chart table and stared down at it. Thunder rumbled and the invisible hands of the dark sea mauled the listing freighter. From the corner of his eye Dixon saw the second mate and the owner glance uneasily at each other. Hank Beecher shifted uncomfortably, then moved toward him.

"What's up, Pete?"

Dixon frowned at the chart before he looked up.

"The Old Man's leg needs more than the jury rigging I can give it," he said. 'I'm putting in at St. George's, Bermuda."

Hank Beecher looked sharply at him. Mr. Hanlon moistened his lips as a pillar of lightning high-lighted the tossing crests and shadowed the deep troughs.

"With this list," he protested, "you've got to keep her headed into the sea, and you can't do it if you change course for—"

"When I want your opinion I'll ask for it," Dixon cut in.

"You'll capsize us," declared Hanlon.

"Dixon," began Mr. Brady.

Dixon ignored him and turned to the helmsman.

"Right rudder. Ease her off slowly now, not too much so I can get the feel of her."

He froze his features into hard lines so as not to betray his inner uneasiness.

The *Southern Pride* shifted course slightly and angled up a grayback. She heeled way over to starboard. Mr. Brady glared at Dixon, then clutched for the rail and looked sick with fright. Dixon's stomach was a tight knot. The freighter snouted through the crest and lurched toward port, but her shifted cargo would only let her come to an even keel athwartships. She swayed down toward the trough as though she were going to corkscrew her way to the bottom. When she tackled the next sea, she threw her lee rail way down again.

Dixon saw Hank Beecher shaking his head slightly. He stepped to the engine-room telegraph and signaled for less speed.

"Swing her off a few points more," he ordered the helmsman. And a few moments later: "A bit more. All right, steady as she goes."

The freighter wallowed and reeled drunkenly, but her reduced speed gave her chance to recover herself between seas.

"Nice handling, Pete," said Hank Beecher.

MR. BRADY frowned at Dixon and groped his way from the bridge, and Hanlon followed him. Hank Beecher lingered. When there was a flash of lightning, Dixon saw him scowling at the crests of the seas being shredded by the wind. Dixon remained uneasily silent, waiting. Finally Beecher spoke, and it was obvious he was trying to sound casually unconcerned.

"You ever taken a ship into St. George's?" he asked.

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"There's got to be a first time for everything," said Dixon softly.

"Yeah," Beecher said doubtfully, dropping his glance briefly to the chart. Dixon knew he was looking at the marks denoting all the reefs that barricade the passage to St. George's.

"The chart's accurate," said Dixon. "After I looked at the Old Man's leg I went to the radio shack before I came to the bridge. I had Sparks radio the pilot station at St. David's and inquire about the chart."

"Guess everything's okay then," muttered Beecher with an uncertain smile. He hurriedly left the bridge.

All night Dixon remained on the bridge as the listing freighter labored over the rough seas like a bird trailing a broken wing. Dixon had never seen the pre-dawn darkness so black—or was it just his wearied bloodshot eyes making it seem that way?

"Mr. Allen," he ordered, "keep a lookout now for—"

He stopped and frowned irritably as Hank Beecher appeared on the starboard wing of the bridge for the third time in the past hour.

"Why don't you speak up and say it, Hank?" he snapped as the engineer came inside. "Why keep up the pretense? You don't trust me any more than the rest—"

Beecher's expression was pained.

"Take it easy, Pete," he muttered, his glance going pointedly beyond Dixon toward the port side of the bridge. Dixon turned. Brady and Mr. Hanlon were stepping too casually onto the bridge. Dixon wondered if they had overheard. He glared at Beecher who avoided his gaze, then turned to the third mate gain.

"Mr. Allen," he said curtly, "we'll keep watch now for the North Rock Light."

Mr. Brady peered through his glasses at Dixon.

"Mr. Dixon," he inquired. "Have you ever taken a ship through these reefs before?"

Dixon frowned impatiently. "Captain Vromer—" he began.

"I realize the captain's in no condition now to come up," declared Brady. "But Mr. Hanlon," he said firmly, "has been to St. George's before. I'd suggest that you let him—"

"He's on the bridge, isn't he?" retorted Dixon.

Lightning pitchforked off to starboard. Combers of thunder broke and rolled among the heavy headlands of clouds. Dixon blinked his bloodshot eyes and resisted the temptation to look at the chart again. Hadn't he been studying it all night? Didn't he know exactly everything he must do? Pick up the North Rock Light now and make a turn toward . . .

He started as young Mr. Allen suddenly stabbed his arm out and blurted: "There, sir!" The third mate's apple cheeks ripened. He modulated his tone and spoke sheepishly. "The North Rock Light, sir."

Dixon watched the light and was aware of the eyes turned intently upon him, especially those of Mr. Hanlon. Finally he turned to the helmsman. Mr. Hanlon was turning to squint at the light.

"Left rudder," Dixon ordered. "Change course to—"

There was a series of vivid lightning flashes that daylighted the rumpled sea. Crashing thunder drowned him out before he could give the new course.

"Helmsman," Dixon repeated, "change course to—"

"Hold on!" yelled Mr. Hanlon. "Don't change course!"

Dixon frowned at him.

"And why not?" he demanded.

The second mate moistened his lips. "There's a ship dead ahead, going the same way we are," he explained hastily. "You're making the turn too soon!"

Dixon looked toward the North Rock Light. The incessant drumming of rain seemed to echo his racing heart. He was silent for a tortured moment.

"This is where the turn should be made," he declared. "Helmsman—"

"Just a moment," cried Mr. Brady. "I saw that ship too, Dixon."

Young Mr. Allen shifted uncomfortably and nodded when Dixon glanced at him.

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"I saw it, sir," he murmured.

Dixon looked at Hank Beecher who pressed his lips and nodded slightly, staring tensely.

There was another flash of lightning, and this time Dixon saw the other ship far ahead on the heaving sea. Darkness blotted in again. For a moment he regretted being in complete command. His mouth was suddenly a desert without an oasis.

"I checked up on the chart last night, and it's accurate," he declared decisively, wondering whether he were trying to convince himself or the others. "This is the time to make the turn. I'll not follow in the wake of anyone who is making a mistake. Helmsman," he commanded grimly, "Change course to—"

"*You're* making the mistake!" shouted Mr. Hanlon, trying to drown him out.

Dixon looked hard at the pale and bewildered helmsman who began turning the wheel uncertainly.

"See here, Dixon," Mr. Brady barked.

Dixon, watching the binnacle, interrupted curtly.

"You've been saying 'See here' ever since you came aboard, and you've been wrong every time you've said it. Don't try to chart my course for me until you're able to chart your own."

Mr. Brady just stared and was speechless. But not Mr. Hanlon.

"The man's gone mad with authority," he snapped. "It's time we put a stop to it before he runs us on a reef."

He started toward Dixon.

"Stand back," Dixon warned him, glancing anxiously to see what Beecher and the third mate were going to do. And then Hanlon was upon him. Dixon parried the second mate's blow aside with his left forearm and drove his right through to the jaw. Hanlon went down heavily and stayed down.

Dixon rubbed his knuckles and glanced at Brady, then at the binnacle.

"Steady as she goes," he ordered grimly, his mouth hard.

"Aye, aye, sire," the helmsman replied uneasily. "Steady as she goes."

ST. DAVID'S Light made a last piercing stab at the retreating darkness and then went out as the advance gray legions of dawn fought through the storm. Dixon stood wearily on the starboard wing of the bridge. The pilot and a doctor were coming aboard. The steward took the doctor direct to the Old Man's cabin. The pilot mounted to the bridge.

"Mean list you've got here," remarked the pilot.

"Is there any news about a ship in trouble?" Dixon demanded; and when the pilot looked at him he explained quickly about the other ship that had been seen in the storm. "The chart is correct so far as I've used it," he said, "so that may mean the other ship is on the outer reefs by now."

"She's on all right," agreed the pilot.

"Did she send an SOS?" Dixon asked. "Are there any other ships near her? Maybe we'd better go out there and—"

The pilot frowned at him, and looked at the others on the canting bridge. "There's no one aboard her. There hasn't been for three months!"

"Three months?" Dixon ejaculated.

The pilot nodded. "The North Rock Light was out of order one night. We saw that ship coming in and tried to warn her, but her operator was too busy about something else to pick up our warning. So his ship didn't make the turn, but drove straight ahead and full onto the outer reefs. In clear moonlight at that. We've tried to pull her off, but her bottom's ripped out and—"

The pilot was suddenly aware of the way Dixon stared at him, the way Mr. Hanlon's Adam's apple bobbed, the way Brady, Beecher, and the third stared at Dixon.

"Say," he demanded, "don't tell me you thought she was a ship under way?"

"That's right; she looked like it in the storm," growled Hank Beecher. "She played Lorelei and damn near lured us off our course."

The pilot swore softly. "I'll report that. Something will have to be done."

"I should say so," declared Mr. Brady. "It's not every ship that has a captain, or a first mate, who's got sense enough to

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know when he's right and courage enough to stick to his decision."

Dixon saw Mr. Brady's glance briefly impale Mr. Hanlon; then the owner was coming toward him with extended hand.

"Dixon," he said, "you were right, I've been wrong about many things."

Dixon did not know what to say. He just stood there in a warm glow and grasped the owner's hand. Mr. Brady was saying something about Captain Vromer's taking command of the Pride Line's new ship.

"I believe you mentioned something about a master's ticket," he said. "I hope you're as right about that, Dixon, as you have been about everything else."

"Sure he is," grinned Hank Beecher, and Dixon looked at him. Beecher smiled apologetically. "Guess you had a right to get sore at me, Pete, from the appearances." He drew Dixon aside. "I couldn't speak up and tell you everything was okay. The Old Man made me promise to keep silent unless something started to go wrong.

"The Old Man?" Dixon questioned.

"Yeah," said Beecher. "I told you he was as square as they make them. Remember I told you he'd give you a break after he calmed down about Brady? Well, he suddenly came to his senses when you were lashing him in and he saw how you had nerve enough to put Brady in his place. He told me later to keep him informed of everything you did, and when he heard you were heading for Bermuda he explained to me all that had to be done to get by the reefs. I wasn't to say a word to you though unless you started to go wrong. He wanted to be sure you'd grow your gray hairs, but I'll bet he never counted on that Lorelei ship! I grew a couple of gray hairs myself then."

Dixon met the doctor leaving the Old Man's cabin.

"Tough old bird," the doctor commented. "The only thing I'm worried about is keeping him down long enough to give the bones a chance to knit. You saved his leg for him, Mr. Dixon."

"He saved plenty for me too," said Dixon, and entered the cabin.

The Old Man scowled at him.

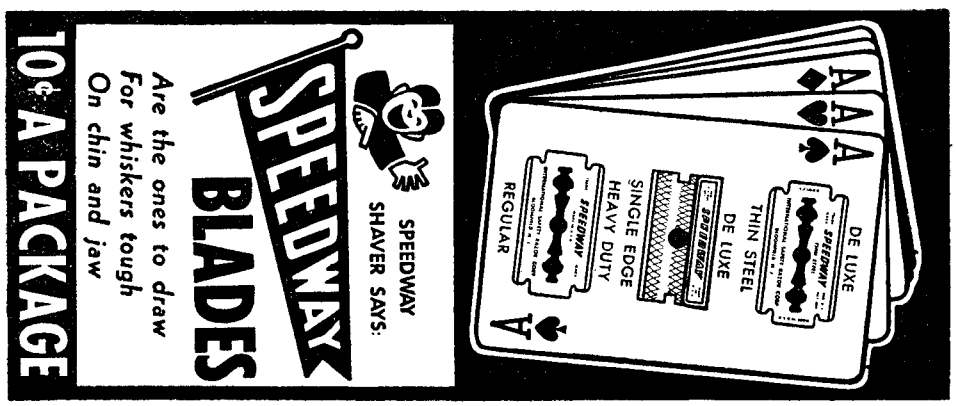
"Fang-dangled Sawbones," he snapped. "He lashed me in again. Get these lines off me before I use this jackknife I've been holding ever since you first lashed—" He stopped short when he realized what he was saying. "Don't keep staring at me like that, Mr. Fairweather Dixon," he growled, his eyes twinkling. There was a difference, a mighty big difference, thought Dixon, in the way that name Fairweather could sound when a man said it with a smile.

He groped for the Old Man's hand and felt it tighten about his own.

"I came down, sir," he said, "to let you see the few gray hairs you helped me grow."

"Bilge water," scoffed the Old Man. "Your head's too blond to grow gray hairs."

He and Dixon laughed together.



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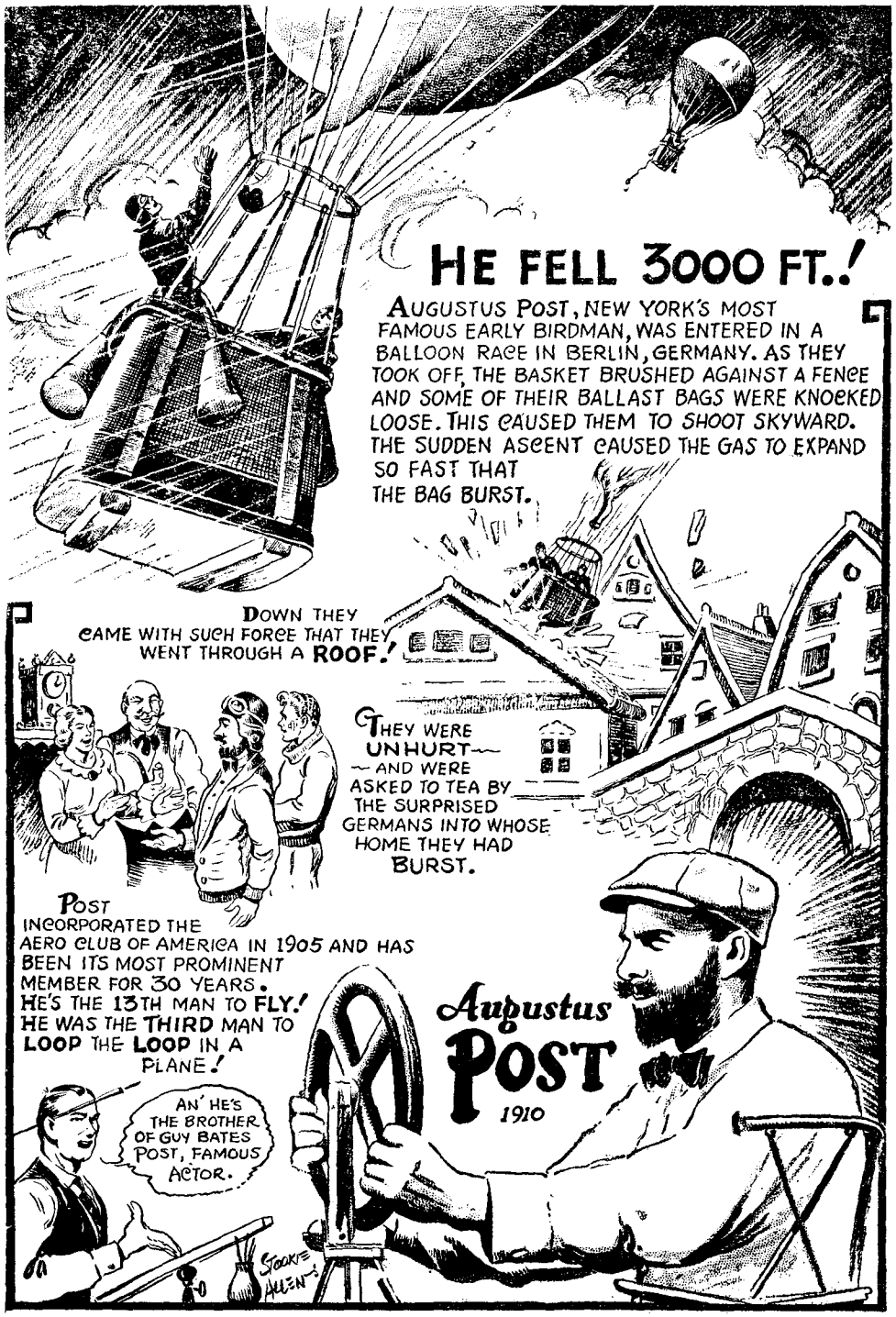
by — # MEN of DARING — STOOKIE ALLEN


HE FELL 3000 FT.!
AUGUSTUS POST, NEW YORK'S MOST FAMOUS EARLY BIRDMAN, WAS ENTERED IN A BALLOON RACE IN BERLIN, GERMANY. AS THEY TOOK OFF, THE BASKET BRUSHED AGAINST A FENCE AND SOME OF THEIR BALLAST BAGS WERE KNOCKED LOOSE. THIS CAUSED THEM TO SHOOT SKYWARD. THE SUDDEN ASCENT CAUSED THE GAS TO EXPAND SO FAST THAT THE BAG BURST.
DOWN THEY CAME WITH SUCH FORCE THAT THEY WENT THROUGH A ROOF!
THEY WERE UNHURT— —AND WERE ASKED TO TEA BY THE SURPRISED GERMANS INTO WHOSE HOME THEY HAD BURST.
POST INCORPORATED THE AERO CLUB OF AMERICA IN 1905 AND HAS BEEN ITS MOST PROMINENT MEMBER FOR 30 YEARS. HE'S THE 13TH MAN TO FLY! HE WAS THE THIRD MAN TO LOOP THE LOOP IN A PLANE!
AN' HE'S THE BROTHER OF GUY BATES POST, FAMOUS ACTOR.
Augustus POST 1910
STOOKIE ALLEN

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

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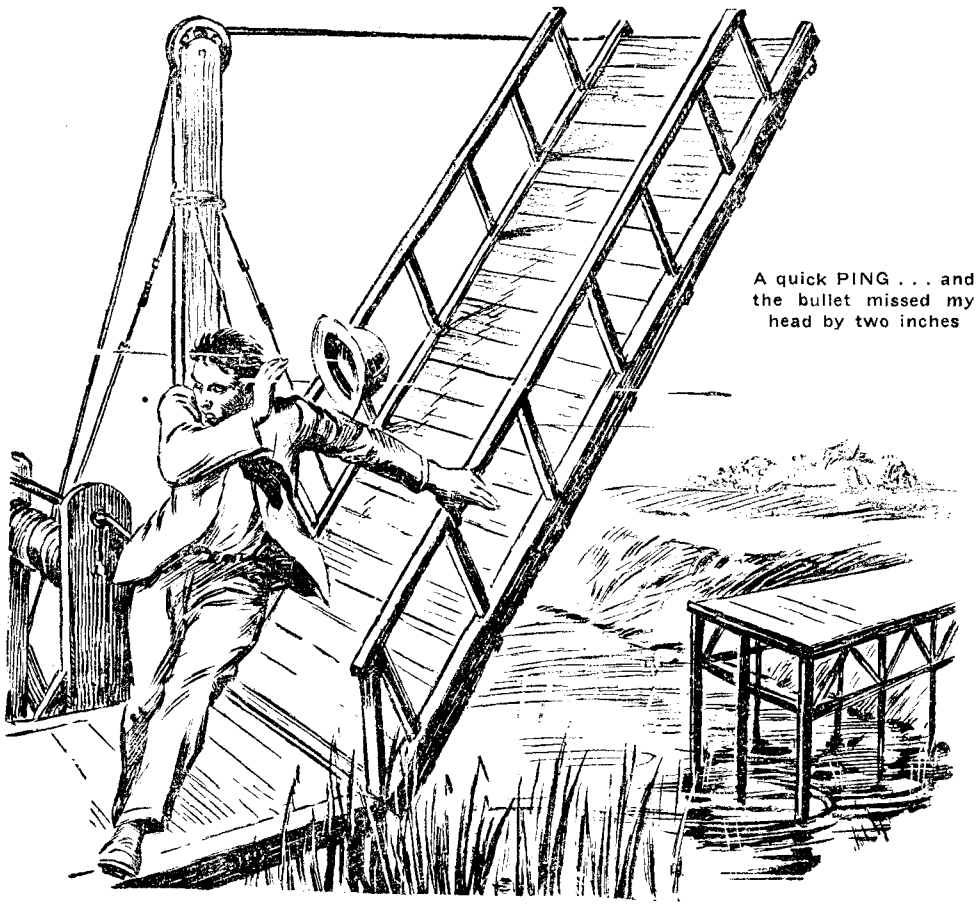

A quick PING . . . and the bullet missed my head by two inches

The Devil's Diary

By WILLIAM DU BOIS

PLENTY of people had good reason to shove Owen Cary out of a fifth-story window to his death. For Cary, the newspaper tycoon and owner of the *Star*, had stepped on thousands of faces on his way up; and, even more important, he was going to publish the confidential diary of Larry Ray, the columnist who knows everything about everybody. But now Cary is dead, and the only manuscript of the diary—seen in his hand a few hours before—has disappeared. Larry Ray, meanwhile, has secluded himself on an island off the coast of Florida.

Jack Jordan, crack reporter for the *Star*, who is telling the story, finds himself up to his neck in the mystery. Shrewd Lieutenant Hurlbut is watching him carefully; and then, a few minutes before Jordan is to start on a Bermuda vacation with his wife Trudy, there is another murder.

That afternoon Jordan rides to the pier with Nancy Janeway, another gossip columnist; she is drunk and babbling that she knows the truth about the Cary mystery. Jordan rushes to the gangplank to meet his wife—only to be grabbed by cops. Two minutes after he left the cab Nancy Janeway was shot through the head.

JORDAN and Hurlbut check over the people who are possible suspects. There are Owen Cary's two former wives: Blanche Cary, now priestess of a wacky religious

This story began in the Argosy for September 30

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sect; and Anita Ames the glittering movie star. Senator Anthony Parsons was frightened of the Ray diary; but he seems to have a sound alibi, and Jack Jordan believes in the innocence of Parsons' fiancee, Doris Blake, also involved. Mark Evans, the gin-soaked Hollywood Adonis, was terrified that Ray's diary would wreck his career.

The person Jack Jordan worries the most about is young Doctor Joe Piccari, his best friend. Dr. Joe, a brilliant surgeon, is the son of an ex rum-king; furthermore, he is engaged to a wealthy society girl. He had feared that Larry Ray would ruin his reputation and break his engagement by revealing details about old Joe Piccari's career in the prohibition days.

JORDAN'S managing editor orders him to fly to Florida and interview Larry Ray. A few hours before the plane leaves Jordan pays a visit to old Joe Piccari, who lives in retirement, still untouched by the law. Jordan finds the old man deeply distressed about his son; he has not seen him for ten years, and now he pleads with Jack Jordan to help bring about a reconciliation.

Dr. Joe has left for Florida that day; and the old man announces that he is flying down there with Jordan. Jordan can do nothing but consent, for the old rum-king tells him that one of his strong-arm men is at present keeping an eye on Trudy at the airport. So Old Joe and Jordan set out on a wild drive to catch the plane. . . .

CHAPTER XIX

SATURDAY MORNING: 10:00

WHEN I first opened my eyes the next morning, I didn't remember where I was, or why. Obviously, I'd been lying quite awhile in this twin-bed—I couldn't have felt so rested, otherwise. It also seemed likely that Trudy had occupied the other bed recently, though she was not in evidence at the moment.

Don't accuse me of amnesia, either. I'd never felt more alert in my life. But a certain kind of sleep, taken after a certain kind of exhaustion, always gives me the temporary feeling of being born again, minus the disadvantages.

I looked for the alarm clock that had wakened me—only it was a telephone.

"Ten o'clock, Mr. Jordan," murmured a pleasant Southern voice at the other end.

"Not another word," I said, triumphantly. "This is the Hotel Casa de Mar in St. Augustine."

"You left a call for ten, didn't you, sir?"

"I rather think so," I murmured. "In fact, it's all coming back perfectly."

After I'd convinced him I was reasonably sane, I ordered orange juice, and stretched out for five more drowsy minutes to piece it out. Our wild ride to Newark. The way Trudy's face lighted up when I dashed into that waiting room with five whole minutes to spare. The question in her eyes, when Old Joe came in on my heels—and the way they cottoned to each other from the start. The hurried phone call to Mac to let him know I was on the job, just in case one of Hurlbut's boys was counting noses. Pud Revelli, stepping out from behind a baggage truck to help with our bags.

Hiatus to Jacksonville, as the car we'd hired at the airport roared down empty Main Street at three A.M. Pine barrens, dusty-white under a high round moon, and St. Augustine just this side of dawn. . . . It's an age of miracles, all right. We'd taken advantage of several to bring us here.

I reached again for the phone. "Have you seen my wife?"

"Mrs. Jordan, sir? She went out, an hour ago. Left a note in your mailbox. I'm sending it up on your breakfast tray."

Well, that was reassuring enough, for the moment. I eased open the hall door, and took a quick, two-way look. Nothing suspicious there, either. Why should I have the feeling that someone was watching the stair to the lobby?

Trudy might come and go, but it would be another story for me, all right. I almost put my instinct to the test, before I remembered I was in pajamas. Then I closed the door softly, and went over to the window to pull up the blind.

Hot sunlight splashed over my bare toes, as I breathed in the blue wash of morning air from Matanzas Bay. The hotel garden was directly below me, as full of

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hibiscus and date palms as a three-tone advertisement. Even from the window, that bay and garden smelled like Florida—an aroma composed of one part dead hyacinth, three parts sunbitten sand, ten parts attar of real-estate.

THEN I spotted the couple having breakfast at the water's edge. Duncan Green fitted the scene perfectly, right down to his doeskin slacks and espadrilles. He basked as he destroyed his eggs and bacon, like a lizard in the sun. The lovely Anita lounged under a circus umbrella beside him, looking even more fetching than usual in shorts-and-halter, after you'd made allowances for her table manners.

I closed my eyes and counted ten. Sure enough, Mark Evans was strolling out from the hotel to meet them when I took my second peek—so tropical in white linen it hurt your eyes to look. Perhaps Duncan Green hadn't misled Mac too much, after all. Perhaps they were on location now, and waiting for the cameraman.

They were certainly waiting for something, and I dropped my blind in a hurry, just in case it was me. I was doing deep-breathing exercises, and almost enjoying them, when a colored boy brought in my breakfast.

Trudy's note was under the marmalade:

Dear Jack:

This is an afterthought from the lobby, in case you'd think I had eloped with your friend Big Caesar. (By the way, he seems to be snoring comfortably two doors down from us).

I'm going to the Ancient City Garage to look at jaloppies; then to the hairdresser's on the plaza to restore my shattered morale. Back at eleven.

Trudy (the Model Wife)

Thanks to that, I really swallowed my food. I wasn't even startled—much—when my door opened sans knock, and Dr. Joe whisked in. In fact, I was pouring coffee at the moment, and didn't spill more than half a cup.

"Hello, early bird," I said.

"They said at the desk that you were awake, Jack. I couldn't wait downstairs any longer."

"Sit down and have some coffee, doctor," I said.

He looked hurt. "Aren't you surprised to see me?"

"On the contrary. Who told you we were at this hotel?"

"Miss Carter. She's parked in the driveway, waiting to take you to Ray. It seems the *Star* wired him that you'd register here."

"So you did come south with Daphne yesterday?"

Joe brushed past that. "I met Pud in the hall. Does that mean my father's here, too?"

"Room One Twenty-eight. Shall we wake him up?"

He had me by my pajama-front now, lifting me. "Is this your idea of a joke? What's he after?"

I shook myself free, with dignity. "A hell of a nerve you have, interrupting a man's breakfast with so many questions. Especially a man whose motive for being here is quite above suspicion."

That cooled him down at once. "I suppose you and my father flew down together?"

His voice was shaking. I saw it was useless cruelty not to bring him up to date as quickly as possible.

"FURTHERMORE," I concluded the resumé, "he insisted on hiring a car in Jacksonville, so we'd be sure to wake up in the same town with you. How's that for parental devotion?"

"He must be out of his head."

"Or spoiling for a good excuse to get into the world again—"

But young Joe was not in a confiding mood this morning. "I was equally insane, of course, to telephone him yesterday. But I wanted to set his mind at rest. I wanted him to know I'd find some way of handling Ray."

"Have you?"

"Not yet," said Joe, curtly. "As always, you are making me say far too much."

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I started to get into my clothes, pretending not to notice his marathon up and down that bedroom. "So Ray wouldn't see you?"

"Miss Carter was kind enough to convey the request last night. He refused to receive me."

"I could have prophesied that yesterday. And now we're on the subject, why didn't you wait in your office for my call?"

His mind, jumpy as a squirrel, jumped back at that. "So you did phone me back?"

"And almost got your colleague, Dr. Donovan. They said you'd left town hours ago."

"Miss Carter advised an early afternoon plane. She felt there was no time to lose, if I wanted to get through to Ray."

"Yesterday morning, on Park Avenue, you were giving a good imitation of a thoughtful doctor, worrying about a rich patient. I enjoyed that act much better than the one you're putting on now."

"Everything I told you in New York is true, Jack. Miss Cummings and her father are arriving this afternoon, by train. I am staying at the Lakes, to be on hand when they arrive. They're to be house guests for the weekend, before Gardner Cummings goes on for the fishing."

"In other words, this little town looks more like Mecca by the hour."

"For God's sake, don't be cryptic."

"I couldn't make a plainer statement, Doctor," I said, pushing the blind aside and pointing into the garden. "Look at that Hollywood trio under the umbrella. According to the New York papers, they're halfway to California by now. Two to one Gardner Cummings hasn't said a word about breaking his trip to Palm Beach, either. . . . At least your dad came out of his hideaway honestly, without throwing me on a false scent."

I stamped my feet into tennis shoes. "What's it add up too? Each one of you is thinking about that missing diary and wondering if Ray is writing a second, there in his hideaway. Each one of you is hoping to persuade him to leave you out of print, this time—"

This got me comfortably into a white coat. "How's that for an honest diagnosis, Doctor?"

Young Joe smiled for the first time. "A little too honest for comfort, perhaps. But don't leave out the police. Miss Carter informs me that a New York plainclothes man paid Ray a visit early today."

"Was his luck any better than yours?"

"Ray is living on an island in the Matanzas," said Joe bitterly. "He talked to me from the bank. When the detective arrived, he refused to appear at all."

"He was well within his rights. No one has the authority to disturb him at his work."

"Is he really preparing another manuscript for publication, Jack?"

"It's quite possible," I said, watching him closely. "Office rumor has it that he's hard up for cash right now, and Carey was supposed to have offered him enough to outlive the next three depressions if he'd really go to town."

"Must he deliver the goods, before he's paid?"

"How should I know? I said it was only a rumor."

"You are a great help this morning, Jack."

"Listen, Joe," I said, patiently. "I haven't asked you what your crusade's about, nor do I intend asking. You may be hoping to cover your father's tracks—or your own—or Miss Cummings'. Possibly all three. If you'd waited for my phone call yesterday—and followed the suggestion I intended making—you'd be at Putnam Hospital now, in a nice white gown and mask, tranquilly removing someone's appendix."

"But you wouldn't wait."

"Now that you're here, I'm begging you to spend the day on the beach, and take the afternoon train back. If Ray's refused to see you, you're doing worse than wasting your time. You're riding for a—"

"How can you talk like this? Have you forgotten my father?"

"Use your head," I snapped. "Look who's standing in the doorway."

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CHAPTER XX

SATURDAY MORNING: 10:30

OLD Joe had opened the hall door very quietly indeed. In fact, the only thing loud about him was the purple gaberdine suit—and the way he kissed his son on both cheeks after his first bear-like hug. Young Joe hugged back with interest, and the conversation went into fast Italian. Not that it didn't bring a lump to your throat, no matter what language you were brought up on.

Here they were, living in different worlds for ten years, calling each other every name from milksop to Mussolini, calling each other plenty now, if only I could understand it, and yet, loving each other as though they'd never been apart.

Let me tell you, I backed out of that room as fast as I could. You'd have to be a born eavesdropper to listen in on that sort of reunion.

Don't ask me if Pud Revelli stepped out of a linen closet, or thin air. He was right at my elbow before I'd gone ten paces down that hallway.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Jordan—?"

"What would happen if I did?"

He grinned, and dropped one polite pace behind. We proceeded down the stairs in this formation, through the hotel lobby, and out to the front veranda.

The Casa de Mar is the only big hotel in St. Augustine open at that time of year; judging by the number of rockers along the rail, and the octogenarians occupying them. the only thing Spanish about it was its name. You never saw anything more dyed-in-the-wool Yankee than that knitting brigade. In fact, you had to look twice at the bougainvillia over the entrance to remind yourself that you weren't on the porch of a boarding house in Bangor, Maine.

I went two steps down to the driveway, and Pud took one. Daphne Carter sat in a maroon roadster at the curb a hundred feet beyond, where Bay Street swept away in a long half-moon to the bridge.

"See that lady in the roadster, Pud? Would you throw a fit if I walked down and spoke to her, alone?"

"Not me, Mr. Jordan." He nodded toward the touring car Old Joe had hired last night in Jacksonville, still parked on the driveway. "I just sit under our wheel, to play safe."

"Look here, the boss has met up with his son—isn't that what he came South for? What difference does it make if I—"

But he had already climbed into the touring car. As I walked indignantly by on my way to Daphne's running-board, I heard him turn over the engine, and throttle down. After all, Pud had been taught to keep his engine running in emergencies; who was I to break him of a good habit?

SHE must have seen me in her windshield mirror, because she spoke first, without turning her sleek blond head. "Well, Jack, this is enough to restore one's faith in magic carpets."

"Put it that way, if you insist," I said, striking as gallant an attitude as I could on her mudguard.

"Who's the friend with the ingrown eyebrows who came down the steps with you?"

"Who else but Old Joe's valet?"

"He doesn't look too much like a valet from here."

"He isn't. I was speaking figuratively"

"I'm glad the doctor located his father so soon."

"Quite a coincidence, isn't it, that they should both come to Florida for their health, a whole month ahead of the season?"

"Skip it, Jack, will you? My orders are to take you out to Mr. Ray, as soon as you're ready to go."

"I'm quite comfortable here," I said, smiling back at Pud. "Let's wait a minute more, just in case we have company."

"The pass is only good for one, I'm afraid."

"Any bets that Old Joe crashes through ahead of me?"

We both studied the touring car in

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Daphne's windshield mirror. The engine was still running and Pud sat at attention like a soldier, with one paw on the gear-shift.

"Skip that too, if you don't mind," said Daphne. "I'm in no mood to figure the odds, after the night I put in."

"Lots of typing?"

"Plenty."

"Mind explaining why you didn't fly down with Ray?"

"I had homework in New York."

"Had you planned to join him later?"

"Not until I got his wire. When I said goodbye to him in Newark, I thought I was out of a job for awhile."

"Too bad there isn't another girl in America who could help him to put those diary notes together in a hurry."

"You're very clever, aren't you, Jack? I wish I had your keen analytical mind."

"Thank you for keeping this on an intellectual plane, Miss Carter," I said, sliding down from the mudguard. "Here comes my wife in a devil-wagon, with blood in her eye."

"Nonsense," said Daphne, waving, "she's just having a little trouble with her gear-shift."

Trudy waved back from the high seat of the jalopy as she came to an unsteady stop at the curb, making more noise with her brakes than a tractor in reverse. "Like it, darling?"

"How much?" I asked.

"Fifty-eight dollars, cash. Believe it or not, she'll do forty when excited."

"What's her vintage?"

"The middle Twenties, but her soul is immortal. The mother was a Chevrolet, so Miss Carter and I decided she should be called Yvonne. If you're nice to Yvonne, you may have a ride."

I looked from Daphne to Trudy, and back again. "Don't tell me you two have been getting acquainted?"

"What's the hairdressers' for?" asked Daphne.

"Believe it or not," said Trudy, just as cheerfully, "I even apologized for my foul suspicions that day at the Stork."

I SAT down again on Daphne's mudguard. "Thanks, ladies," I murmured. "At least, this is one complication I needn't worry about."

"I thought your worries were over, once you'd interviewed Mr. Ray," said Trudy. "Here's his secretary, ready to bring you together. Why don't you get the job over?"

"That's my intention, darling, the moment our traveling companion gets downstairs. You see, I've a hunch he'd like to come along. At least, his chauffeur's waiting on the driveway."

"What a shame," said Trudy. "I was going to suggest that Mr. Picarri go sightseeing with me." She turned to Daphne. "I've always wanted to meet a retired gangster in the flesh, but this is the first time Jack has obliged me."

"Good old Trudy," I said gratefully. "The wife who takes life in her stride."

"After all, my love, you'll admit I've had lots of practice."

Trudy punched the jaloppy's starter with a tentative toe. Yvonne thought it over, and wheezed hopefully. All right, you'd wheeze too, if you had eighty thousand miles on your speedometer.

"Try to be back for lunch, darling," said Trudy.

"You're letting me go just like this?"

"Why not? You're in good hands." She punched the starter a second time. Yvonne rumbled encouragingly, and lurched into low. "I've lots of sightseeing to do," said Trudy, "so I'll wait for lunch until three —just in case." She tested Yvonne's horn with vague results, waved as she took the turn for Fort Marion, and was gone.

"Doesn't she ever get mad?" asked Daphne.

"Only if she thinks other women are after me," I said as I got virtuously into the roadster beside her.

"Are they, frequently?"

"This is no time for cheap humor," I said. "Look in your windshield mirror."

We looked together. To the almost audible consternation of the knitting brigade, Old Joe had just charged out to the

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veranda, cigar militant, his purple suit an even nobler hue in the sunlight. Young Joe was right with him and stayed with him, straight to the door of the touring car. Father got in, and the son remained on the driveway, slamming that car door loudly enough to set the gulls screaming on the Matanzas.

"Lead off, Miss Carter," I said. "Apparently our caravan is complete."

But Daphne had started her motor long ago.

I glanced back just once, as that touring car swung into Bay Street after us. Joe was still standing in the hotel driveway with his arms akimbo, looking about as happy as a prime minister after Munich.

CHAPTER XXI

SATURDAY MORNING: 11:30

WE DROVE in silence, past the Ponce de Leon monument and up the ramp to the bridge. There was a whiff of the sea, as soon as we had crossed the Matanzas. I relaxed beside Daphne, enjoying the warm wind on my face, trying not to look too intoxicated by all that fresh air. So help me, I had begun to feel a trifle sunkissed already.

"What's the frown for?" I asked. "Bring your problem to Jack Jordan. I diagnose free of charge."

"You know very well why I'm frowning. I don't like the idea of that car trailing us to Mr. Ray's."

"Remember that's your fault entirely. After all, it was your idea, inviting Joe to fly down here with you yesterday afternoon."

"I beg your pardon. The doctor insisted on coming, after I'd advised strongly against it."

"Be that as it may—you should have realized the doctor's old man would never let him face that wolf alone."

"Even when the doctor is trying to save his father?"

"Old Joe's a primitive Christian," I said. "He believes the Lord helps those who help themselves."

"Don't rub it in," said Daphne. "I've called myself enough names, since I walked into Dr. Joe's office yesterday."

"Frankly, Daphne, I wouldn't class it among your brighter moves, unless it helps Ray round out his story on the Piccaris."

Daphne honked viciously to pass a motorbus. "So that's the way you've figured me?"

"How else can I figure?"

"Suppose I told you Dr. Joe was my friend?"

"So much the better, from Ray's angle."

"I know what you're thinking, Jack, and you're dead wrong. I am *not* helping Mr. Ray put his diary together a second time."

"What about all last night's typing?"

"Since you insist, I was typing up a long, perfectly innocuous chapter on his years in London—"

"While he re-types the real dynamite, from memory?"

Daphne jammed her accelerator down to the floor.

"I've told you all I know now, and more. I never laid eyes on a line of that original manuscript, either. Don't speak of the hints I gave you for those advance blurbs. Remember, they were all prepared by Mr. Ray in advance. Don't even mention the way he made me swagger out of Carey's private elevator that night with the thing under my arm."

She gave me a quick, defiant look, then turned her attention to the road. We had swung away from the beach, taking a two-lane highway that ran parallel to it. Bungalows scattered among the dunes on our left, already few and far between as we left St. Augustine behind. On the right was a tangled sweep of scrub oak and palmetto, merged with the marsh that bordered the bay.

"I've often wondered why he used me as a secretary at all," Daphne continued. "Perhaps he liked me because I could stand anything. At least, I think that's why I lasted longer than the others. Certainly he never confided in me—"

"Go right ahead," I said. "I'm playing this your way, as long as you like."

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"You know he kept me busy enough, Jack. Everyone at the *Star* will admit that. Editing his column when he was too tired, or pasting up that silly Boss-Is-Out special on his day off . . . Weeding out his mail, and being sure not to open the letters marked *Private.* Oh, very sure of that. Remember what happened to that other secretary of his, when she opened that letter from Washington, telling what the President *really* said the day he—"

"Cut it out, Daphne," I said, slowly. "For years now I've had a funny hunch you were on the level. Wouldn't it be a joke on me, if I was right?"

"Then why ask if I'd brought him a story on the Piccaris?"

"Just hoped I could make you mad enough to talk. A typical Jordan trick. Don't hold it against me."

We covered the next mile in real silence.

"One more question, Daphne," I murmured. "How long have you been in love with Dr. Joe?"

"Over a year now—and what's it to you?"

WE HAD turned off the two-lane highway some time ago, and were now bumping along pock-marked macadam in the direction of the bay. The needle of Daphne's speedometer still hung just under sixty, ruts or no ruts. At the moment, I was much too busy digesting her last remark to notice the beating my spine was taking.

"All right, Jack Jordan, you've lured me in the open. It'd make a nice headline, wouldn't it? Columnist's secretary carrying torch for society doctor—"

"Don't let young Joe hear you call him that."

"Then what's he doing at the Lakes? Don't you worry, I know more about Claire Cummings than he'd dare tell me. Don't think he'll come calling at *my* humble boarding-house, now that I've done all I can for him."

"Easy, Daphne, before you break an axle."

"Don't you tell me how to drive, either. And if you ask one more question about my love-life, I'll bounce you into the scrub."

That held me nicely, right up to the moment Daphne slammed on her brakes, and parked beside a limousine with its side-curtains up. I watched her lean back, with an elaborate sigh that fooled no one but herself.

"Journey's end?" I ventured.

"Take a look."

I did, much as I dislike scenery as a rule. We had parked on the bay shore, on the last of the macadam, though the road wandered fuzzily out of sight on a corduroy base from that point on. A path led down to the bank just below us, where a footbridge walked spider-legged across marsh grass and deep water to an islet perhaps five hundred feet from shore. There was a house of some kind out there, muffled up to the eaves in cedar windbreaks.

Ray's hideaway. A setup that would never find its way into a tourist folder. Bleak and malarial are the only words for that segment of North Florida—if you can imagine two such qualities side by side.

"Just the place for a gossip to retire," I murmured, politely.

But something about the tilt of Daphne's chin told me that conversation was still taboo.

The touring car drew up alongside us, and old Joe waved a grave salute from the back seat. Daphne ignored that too, for all of thirty seconds. Then she sounded off with her horn—three short, one long, and a tattoo.

Nothing happened. The cedar windbreaks across that stagnant water still looked bleakly empty as the day the Spaniards came.

Old Joe got ponderously out of the touring car. "Do you go first, Jack, or me?"

I turned to Daphne, who hadn't budged. Pud was already half out of the car on his boss' heels, with both hands in his pockets. I braced myself, and smiled. "Perhaps I'd better make sure you're invited to this party, Joe."

"He will talk to me, all right."

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I glanced again at Pud. "Or else—"

"Since you insist, my friend—or else *I* do the talking."

"At least, wait till traffic clears," said Daphne.

Two men, one woman, and a boy had just emerged from the cedars on the island, and started over the foot-bridge. Only the boy turned out to be Duncan Green in a beret, shepherding his wife, Evans, and a sallow native son who was obviously in their party on terms of less than equality.

If the lovely Anita recognized me as she stepped into the curtained seclusion of that limousine, she wasn't giving any sign of it. Evans did manage something between a monosyllable and a grunt before he climbed in after her. The native son gave us a suspicious glance and held the limousine door adoringly open for Duncan Green, who wasn't condescending this morning, either.

We got a blast of their horn when they backed and missed Pud's bumper by inches. You could just see the top of Green's head above the wheel, as they took the first curve. I don't know why, but that beret made him look more like a jockey than ever.

"You'd think he'd be more polite," I murmured to Old Joe, "considering the money you've put into his business?"

"Life is too short to teach the Turks politeness," said Old Joe. "Who cares what he wants? He does not get it, to judge by his scowl."

"You should be a detective yourself, Joe," I said. "Give Ray the signal again, Daphne."

Daphne nodded toward the bridge. "I don't think that'll be necessary."

We turned back to the island as one man. Ray was standing on the shingly beach, beckoning—to Old Joe, apparently, not to me. Considering the fact that he had a shotgun cradled in one arm, I decided to let Joe go first, after all.

I GOT my sense of locomotion back when they'd vanished among the trees, and ran down to the bridge-head for a better look. Daphne followed, at a much more relaxed pace.

"How long will he keep a *Star* man waiting?" I demanded, a lot more truculently than I felt.

"We can go over when you like," she said, pleasantly. "He'd have raised the draw, if you weren't welcome now."

I saw what she meant when I followed her across that spider-legged walk. The whole middle section was, in fact, a miniature drawbridge, operated by a steel cable and hand-winch on the far side.

As for the island itself, someone had obviously created it years ago, with a sandbar for a starting point. There were even jetties to protect it against the tide-rip, not to mention whole rows of closely driven pilings to hold the earth on the exposed side. The cedars were planted so close together you couldn't locate the house precisely, even after you'd set foot on the path leading up to it.

I'd taken perhaps a dozen healthy strides up that path, before Pud stepped out from behind a treetrunk, and made further exploration impractical. Daphne, who had paused to wind up that drawbridge like a good secretary, apparently had a password that pleased him better.

I backed up to the shingly beach again, watching him follow her among the trees until they were both out of sight. Then I took a stroll around the island. Three times around, to be exact—an exploration which discovered nothing but a half-dozen stranded palmetto logs, and a not-too-leaky rowboat pulled well out of sight among the bushes on the bay side. From this vantage point, you had a surprisingly near view of St. Augustine, a drowsy mirage of a town perhaps two miles away across the flat shimmer of the Matanzas.

Let me tell you, it's an eerie feeling, being four jumps behind the procession, especially when you write news for a living. I looked across the water for a long time before I resumed my promenade, waiting for America's oldest settlement to really take wings and float away into the past.

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The fourth time around, I paused at the drawbridge to give the winch a man-size kick. Sometimes that relieves my feelings, when I'm low. Today, all it did was hurt like blazes. So much, in fact, that I bent to see if my toe was broken. It wasn't—and neither was my head, though the bullet missed it by inches.

CHAPTER XXII

SARURDAY MORNING: 12:00

I SENSED, rather than heard, the light *ping* of the shot from the far bank. Then I was on hands and knees, scuttling for the woods without pausing to check up any further. Then I was running down the path toward the house, password or no password.

I was still trying to get out of Pud's uncomfortably efficient hammer-lock, when Old Joe came strolling back toward the draw, grinning from ear to ear. Don't ask me how I got the news out—backward, I'm sure, from the way he stared.

"A pot-shot, Jack?"

"What else would you call it?"

"No report, eh?"

"No more than a bottle-cork popping the wrong way. It was a silencer, all right."

"Come on, Pud. We see about this."

"But shouldn't we tell Ray?"

"To hell with him. He has enough to worry over."

I found myself following them to the draw again, still suppressing an intense desire to hide behind every treetrunk.

Old Joe was out in the open before I could stop him. When Pud strode out with one contemptuous shrug, and lowered the draw, I pulled myself together and came, too.

"Which way does he shoot from, Jack?"

"A little to the left of where the cars are parked."

Old Joe looked doubtful. "You say this is a *shot*—not maybe humming-birds?"

"Listen, oldtimer—did you ever have a bullet sing past your ear, so close you're sure it went in and out?"

"Stay where you are, my friend. Ray waits for your interview. We beat the bush—and escort you to town."

He went straight across the bridge, with that old Roman jaw pointed joyfully for the job that lay ahead. Pud followed nonchalantly. He still had both hands in his pockets—low down, with both elbows stiff at his side. As for me, I'm ashamed to admit that I had wound up the drawbridge, and was safely in the shelter of the woods again, long before they'd set foot on the other side.

You literally stumbled on the house as you walked in among the trees—a damp stucco bungalow, small enough to have come down from the factory by parcel post. I almost dropped on my hands and knees when a machine-gun rattle started on the veranda, which may give you a faint idea of my nervous state, on hearing Ray's typewriter for the first time in the open air. It was a sound that brought New York very near again.

RAY was sprawled in a deck chair, with the portable on his lap and a mess of copy in a wire basket at his feet. His clothes, including the shirt, were the same he had worn that night in Carey's office. Only the beard was a later inspiration. He seemed pale as ever under it, and twice as tired. In fact, he looked as though he'd been shipped down with that house, and had never quite summoned up interest enough to venture into the sunlight.

Daphne was seated on the veranda steps, doing a high-pressure job with a pile of manuscript all her own. Neither of them gave the slightest notice as I panted up the path toward them. Let me tell you, I'd have exploded on the spot, if I hadn't found it necessary to sit down rather abruptly, and catch my breath.

"Nice to see you, Jordan," Ray muttered, around the pencil clamped in his teeth. "With you . . . minute. Did you put up the draw?"

But Daphne had taken a real look at me now. "What's wrong, Jack? You look like a haunted house."

I told them what was wrong, with de-

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tails. When I turned back to that deck-chair to see how Ray was taking it, he had picked up his typewriter and slammed into the house, without looking back.

"Is that a way to treat a man suffering from agoraphobia?" said Daphne.

"So that's what he's calling it now?" I snapped. "Don't you dare leave this porch until I come back. I don't care how many Italians are beating the palmettoes."

I kicked open the screen door, and followed Ray in. He was sitting with his back against the far wall, the typewriter on his lap again, his copy slap-down on the floor beside him. As for the cottage itself, it seemed to be mostly one room, long on beaver board but short on windows. What furniture I saw had a doll's-house look, as though it had been screwed into the floor when the place was put together. This included the studio bed, which obviously hadn't been slept in. Ray caught my look, and smiled wanly. He seemed much more himself, now he had four walls about him, and a door he could watch.

"Don't ask me where I sleep. So far, I haven't."

I didn't pursue the subject. Somehow, when you thought of Larry Ray asleep, you got nothing but a picture of a bat in a cave. Besides, I had something more important to pursue, now.

"About that pot-shot, Larry—"

So help me, I thought the veins in his neck would burst his collar. Then he pulled himself together with a great effort. "I won't tell you to cut that out again," he said, in that slow, enemy-making drawl of his. "Do you want an interview, or shall I send you back to Mac without one?"

"Of course, if you aren't interested in solemn warnings—"

BUT I had gotten Daphne's point long ago. I've seen cases of plain and fancy funk in my day, but this one took the blue ribbon in any school of jitters. He was so afraid, he was unable to bring his fear into the open and talk about it. That shot had been whistling past his own ear for two nights now.

"Why'd you pick this house, Larry?" I asked, beginning my business call.

"A good Floridan sales talk. I've been wanting to find out about Nature ever since I was born."

So he'd wanted to go back to Nature, the paper-skinned peeping Tom. Sitting in his bungalow, with all the windows closed—eyes bleary from too much smoke, a typewriter still part of his anatomy. . . . The day I swallowed that one I'd be a candidate for the nut-farm myself.

Gossip-monger loves God's footstool— I scrawled across my first sheet of notes.

"Happy here?"

"I'm not sure. So far, I've been too busy to check on it."

He started to talk for publication in earnest now. I took notes dutifully, though my mind stayed just as jumpy as my nerves. My eyes kept going back to that wire basket, and the big pile of sheets. Back to the portable typewriter, sitting like a gray toad on his lap.

The things he said made sense, once you'd granted the premise that a guy like Larry Ray could come out in the daylight and survive. Of course, he meant to build a first-class dwelling on the site, as soon as he made sure he could stand the climate. He had chosen the house because he had always wanted to live on an island, to be monarch of all he surveyed.

The real-estate agent had leased for a remarkably low figure, since the setup had been hard to dispose of, ever since its owner (a New York architect with a fanciful turn of mind) had put it on the market. People said the road to town was bad. Ray's only complaint was the fact that a road existed at all.

Obviously, he had found his Robinson Crusoe act a trifle less than perfect, to date. He had been syndicated for years in the local paper, and the news of his lease of Cedar Island had given their reporter a golden opportunity to show his caliber.

"Don't tell me that was the native son who came out with the Hollywood ambassador?"

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"You haven't lost your grip, Jack." Ray flipped a cigarette end viciously at the half-open window. "How else would Green have tracked me down so soon?"

"Any other visiting firemen?"

"None you'd like to hear about."

"Try me and see."

"None for publication, then."

"This is your interview, Master. There's just one thing I've got to ask you—before Mac dies of apoplexy. You *are* retyping your diary from memory?"

He shot me a narrow-lidded look. "Apparently, you're not the only one who's been working hard on Daphne."

"I've got eyes too, Larry," I said, poking at that copy-crammed wire basket with one timid toe.

"Your round, Jordan. I've run off about twenty thousand words since I got the news. That should fill a few galleys when they start the presses Monday."

"Is that all you've got to say on the subject?"

"There's no moral to the story," said Ray, "unless you want to play up the old bromide about the newspaperman dying in harness."

"Or unless you've picked up a beat here at the tailend of nowhere, and want to sock New York with it, one more time."

"Another bull's-eye, Jordan."

"In other words, you're making a few additions, just for that opening installment?"

"If you insist—yes."

"Any I might mention in the story I'm filing on you this afternoon?"

"Sorry," said Ray.

"What about Old Joe's visit just now?"

"Sorry."

"Young Dr. Joe's attempt to call last night?"

"Still sorrier."

"Why did you talk to Hollywood, and let the local reporter listen in?"

"Let it ride, kid—let it ride."

"Mac will be burning the wires, asking for your copy. Any idea when it'll be ready for him?"

"It's going up at ten tonight, by special plane," he said, calmly. "Daphne doesn't know yet, but I'm making her my messenger."

I inched my chair a little closer to the wire basket. "Any chance of a glimpse—now?"

HE MADE an odd, dry sound in his throat, and I jumped back as though I'd discovered that basket contained nothing more interesting than a diamondback rattler. "You can't blame me for asking, Larry."

"Not at all, Jordan. I always said you have a nose for news." He was pretending to really let down with me, now. Of course, I knew he'd been building to this moment all along.

"Just one question then, to give me a lead. Does this opening installment say anything about Mr. Carey's death?"

Ray chuckled. "It names his killer."

Neither of us spoke, while I made the notation, mechanically. "May I use that in my lead?" I asked, just as mechanically.

"Can you think of a better one?"

"Not unless you go on talking."

Ray leaned back, sleepy-eyed. "Read the *Star* on Monday."

"Still running the interview your way," I said, patiently. "May I check back on what you've just said? If I garble this story, I'm probably fired, you know."

"It was MacDonald's idea, sending you down to talk to me. Why should I feel sorry for you?"

"No reason at all. Pity's a feeling you've got to acquire young," I said, bitterly. "Just the same, my facts have got to be straight. I don't want Mac to think I'm crazy, too. . . . I understand you're flying Daphne north at ten tonight, with a manuscript containing material used in your original diary—plus revelations on the Carey murder case?"

"Correct."

"Is your identification of the murderer positive or circumstantial?"

"Positive enough to satisfy Hurlbut."

"Is that all you care to say at this time?"

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"Absolutely."

I took a fresh sheet, and wrote a list of names down one margin:

Jack Jordan
Rita Arden
Mark Evans
Dr. Joe Piccari
Claire Cummings
Senator Parsons
Doris Blake
Larry Ray
Daphne Carter
George Mac Donald
Blanche Carey
Anita Ames
Duncan Green
Old Joe Piccari

"Is that inclusive?" I asked, handing it over.

Ray read it through, lazily. "That's the last question you're allowed, Jack. The answer is—not for publication."

I'd been boiling for some time, of course. Now I boiled over. "Two bits says you're bluffing, Larry. I'd give anything to—"

"I've one more statement, Jack. Get it verbatim, please." He lit a cigarette, and ruffled the pages in that wire basket through his tobacco-yellow fingers. "My diary, as you have gathered, makes no attempt to be chronological. That's why I'm titling the first chapter *How I solved the Carey murder 1000 miles away.* Perhaps you'll understand why I've had no time for sleep since I arrived? After all, I had only the Associated Press accounts to go on, and what little I picked up from my visitors.

"Carey's murder, taken as a single event, meant even less to me than to Hurlbut. He was on top of the crime, and I was in Florida, and we were both fumbling for a black hat in the dark. When the radio brought the news of Nancy Janeway's death to this neck of the woods, I began to see a glimmer. Eventually, Murder Number Two brought me the solution of Murder Number One. Carey's death alone involved a hundred guesses. Carey's death, plus Nancy Janeway's, narrows the list to a single name—"

"Which you've mentioned in that copy?"

"Which our good friend George MacDonald will read with his own eyes, when Daphne hands him my briefcase tomorrow."

I folded my own thick wad of copy paper, and stuck it in my pocket. "Thanks for the beat, Mr. Ray."

He glanced at his watch. "It's barely one, now. You'll have lots of time to file. Daphne can drive you in to town; I've a message to send with her."

He was typing again now, explosively, with all fingers. For practical purposes, I had left the room long ago. I paused in the doorway, just the same.

"Any message for the local police about that pot-shot?"

"Get out, Jack."

"I should make some report, you know."

"*There wasn't any shot*—understand? You were frightened by a bee."

"Bees in November, Larry? You and Mother Nature must get together."

CHAPTER XXIII

SATURDAY AFTERNOON: 1:00

DAPHNE caught up to me halfway down the path to the drawbridge. By that time, I'd recovered enough sense of proportion to push her back when she tried to follow me into the open. Just enough—no more . . .

Old Joe was sitting in the touring car with his coat off, mopping up with a handkerchief; and Pud, smoking a cigar by the land side of the bridge, waved for us to proceed. I looked back doubtfully for Daphne, but she had picked up the signal already, and started on her own.

"Find anything?" I shouted over.

Pud shook his head, ground out his cigar, and stepped under the wheel of the touring car. Old Joe waved his handkerchief at us as they rode away. He was sweating like a palooka at that moment, but I'd never seen him look happier.

"Maybe it was a bumble bee after all," said Daphne.

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I glanced back toward the island. Don't ask me when Ray had come down to the draw, or how he managed to raise it without showing himself on the shore. He'd raised it somehow, while we were climbing into that roadster.

So anyway, there we were, and I was anxious to be some place else. I looked at Daphne.

"Do you mind taking me out of here in a hurry?"

She obliged, staying within hailing distance of that touring car all the way back to the two-lane highway. I relaxed after the first mile or so.

"So you were listening in?"

"How could I help it?" she asked.

"And you still think it was a bumble bee?"

"Of course I don't, Jack."

I got my teeth in that, and kept on chewing.

"You think someone was laying for Larry out there in the scrub? Someone nervy enough to blaze away at anything he saw—especially a nosey reporter who might know too much?"

"I'm an observing girl," said Daphne. "What else can I think?"

"Then why haven't you got the shakes, the same as me?"

"Perhaps woman is the stronger sex, after all."

I subsided gloomily. What was the use of asking her questions, if she got you in deeper with every answer?

My spine took some more jarring while I thought about that.

"You see, Jack," said Daphne, at length, "people and things have been closing in on Mr. Ray ever since I went to work for him. He's lasted somehow, and so have I. If this is war, I've signed up for the duration. He's still giving orders, I'm taking them."

"Check," I muttered, "there are all kinds of ways to earn a living."

"Not these days there aren't. I'm hanging on to this job while I can."

"Do you honestly believe Ray can name Carey's murderer?"

"Jack, if you'd worked for Mr. Ray as long as I, you'd believe anything."

"Keeping that possibility well in mind—you're willing to fly Ray's manuscript north tonight?"

"Why not?"

"Suppose the gentleman in the palmettoes tried to stop you?"

"Suppose the pioneers had felt that way about the Indians?"

"Maybe you're right about that stronger sex, Daphne."

WE WERE out of the scrub oak, on the two-lane highway. Pud gave that touring car the gas in earnest, now. They must have been doing at least ninety when they whipped out of sight around the first bend.

"At least, old Joe seems to be enjoying the climate," I said.

"Now Jack, don't try to pump me about *him*. That's one interview I didn't take on."

"He made some kind of deal with Ray—you'll have to admit that. Don't tell me it wasn't satisfactory."

"I'm telling you nothing I can possibly avoid."

"Ray's happy about it, too," I said. "Otherwise, he'd never have thought of typewriter into the open air until he was sure that draw had been raised."

"Do me a favor, Jack," said Daphne, abruptly. "Put your bags in that jaloppy, and start your vacation—*now*."

"Not until I've seen you safely to your door, Miss Carter."

"You know I'm delivering a message for Mr. Ray at this moment. After that, I'm returning to the island to work until the plane leaves."

"Then I'll see you back to the drawbridge."

"Since you insist, Jack."

We were turning down Bay Street now, in the direction of the City Gates. As we passed the Casa de Mar, I noticed Yvonne parked in the driveway. So Trudy was still waiting lunch. I put that thought firmly behind me, and faced back to Daphne.

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Of course, she'd said her last word some time ago; but newspapermen are like poets —born, not made. Unlike poets, we have to stick to facts, no matter how it hurts. That's why we keep on inquiring, even when we know the answers in advance.

"Who's the message for—Dr. Joe?"

"No, Jack, but you're getting warm."

"Is it oral or written?"

"Relax and enjoy the scenery. Look at Fort Marion, on our left. It's been there since the sixteenth century. Think of it —standing up under three flags and twenty-nine real estate booms." Daphne slowed down significantly. "A visit to those ramparts should be part of every American's education."

"I'd much rather go visiting with you."

I tossed that out, not hoping for much —but it worked.

"All right, Jack—since it can do no harm. Mr. Ray's message is to be delivered at the Lakes. You've heard of the Kirby Lakes, I suppose?"

"Please, Miss Carter. Would you ask a banker if he'd heard of the Federal Reserve?"

We turned into the Dixie Highway just beyond the Fort, passed the Huguenot cemetery and the golf links, and bored into the open country beyond. Just before we turned into the Lakes' private road, we met the touring car—now on its way back to town, and still doing ninety. Old Joe was up front with Pud, now. Both had their coats off, both had stogies, and Old Joe waved us a royal greeting as they passed. Except for that high-powered car, and the diamond horseshoe in Joe's tie, they might have been a pair of sandhogs on payday.

"Don't tell me they were calling on the Lakes, too?" I asked.

Daphne put her accelerator on the floor without answering.

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The baby screwed up his nose at the cold air and wailed. The men in uniform moved nearer

River Risin'

By RICHARD SALE

Author of "No Patriot There," "Journey to Judgment," etc.

Blood or rain, thunder or cannon—you couldn't always tell them apart, that unhappy Spring in Virginia. But there was a miracle beyond the might of any army, North or South, on the worst night of all

THAT terrible spring the cannon in northern Virginia pounded and pounded. Down in Junesburg you could hear the voice of the fire, and the shudder of the tortured earth at the repercussion.

And in April, when the rains came, they could not tell the thunder from the cannon. The heavens crashed and the earth crashed. The rain poured down across the clay of Virginia; the earth was so fed with water and blood, it was hard to say which there was more of.

It was a battle—a steady, grim, relentless battle; and the men in tired gray were slowly falling back. By day they came through Junesberg, heading for Richmond, the casualties looking sad, numb and ghastly.

Dr. Juniper knew there was a great battle going on. It had been going on for some time, and there was every likelihood that it would continue.

When he told his story, in the years that followed, Dr. Juniper never quite understood how it had happened in such an atmosphere of hate, such a miasma of death. It was a small miracle.

•

Not all the men went to war. But those who stayed behind were either too old, or they had physical defects which would never have survived the ordinary rigors of soldiering, to say nothing of the hard-

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ships of action. Still, most of Junesburg's males trekked out of town to answer the call to the colors when the call came.

Dr. Talisman Samson was one of these —the finest home town doctor in the county. When the war broke, he went into it. It was the only thing he could do. He was decently young, he knew medicine and surgery; and the South was going to need all such men it could get.

It left Junesburg without a medico, the war did.

But there was Dr. Amos Juniper.

Dr. Juniper lived on the south side of Junesburg in a very pleasant white clapboard home which sat on three acres of land.

Folks used to say how Dr. Juniper was just wasting his land, not farming it; for it was good rich earth that hadn't felt a plough for many years.

But that's the way it is when you've chosen your profession. Doc Juniper had stables out in back; and he had transformed the barn into a workshop of fine caliber.

Amos Juniper was sixty-seven years old when he watched the men of Junesburg march off to war. The sight had stirred him strangely; the flag of Virginia brought tears to his mild gray eyes.

He was no old fogy in his dotage. He was just getting on. He would have liked to go marching down Main Street with them; after all, there was a need for his special services in the army too.

But he couldn't do that. He couldn't stand the gaff. Long marches, long rides afoot—and then the engagements, and the steady murderous work of treatment and succor.

They left Amos Juniper behind.

IT NEVER occured to Doc Juniper that Junesburg was a town without medical authority until the night a black boy beat upon the door of his home after midnight and brought him downstairs with a shotgun cradled in his right arm. Doc Juniper opened the door, the shotgun cocked to blow a Yank in half.

But it was Jeebso, who belonged out on the Mansfell plantation where, since the departure of Captain Mansfell for the front, Granny Lou Mansfell reigned supreme. Jeebso was a moon-faced, wide-eyed Mansfell slave, young and healthy "Doctuh, suh!" he panted.

"Full and bye," Doc Juniper said. (He had never seen the ocean in his life.) "This here is a fine time to come callin' on a body, Jeebso. You-all got yourself a mare foalin' up at Scarsta?"

"Doctuh, suh, Miz Granny, she sen' fo' yuh, suh, and she done say yuh gwine t'cum wid speed, suh. Dey's bin a turr'bul acciden' upt' Scarsta and Johnny-boy, he fit t'die outright!"

"Johnny-boy?" Doc Juniper grunted. "Looka here, Jeebso; Miss Granny, she knows damn well ah ain't no practitioner 'roun' heah. Doc Samson, he's the anatom'cal expert in these heah parts."

"He gwine t'war," said Jeebso, rolling his eyes. "Oh, Doc, yuh better come wid speed or ole Granny, she gwine t'breathe fire in yo' face. She say 'Jeebso,' she say, 'yo' go git dat ole fool Juniper and bring 'im back hyar or ah'll burn yo' at stake.' She say dat, Doc, not me!"

Doc Juniper permitted himself a faint smile. It sounded like the hellion, like shrewd old sharp-faced Granny Lou.

"Shiver muh timbers," he said (whose ankles had never even felt the kiss of brine), "if'n Johnny-boy is sick, they ain't nothin' ah can do. Full glory, nigger, ah'm a hoss doctor, not a practicin' surgeon. Ah'm a vet'narian, not a med'co!"

Jeebso groaned, "Lawd, Doc, ah on'y know whut Miz Granny say, and now yo' know whut she say, so yuh bettuh come fas'."

Doc Juniper nodded, sighing. Jeebso was right there. He knew dang well that if he didn't go back, Granny Lou Mansfell would come down out of the hills herself and take him back at the point of a pistol.

"Yo' wait," Dr. Juniper said. "Yo' go on out chonder to th' barn and hitch up Blitzen t' th' shay. Ah'll be 'long directly."

He returned upstairs with the shotgun;

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shed his flannel nightgown and dressed hurriedly. Then he took up his black bag, his revolver, and his boots, and went down. He locked the front door and went around back.

But he had to hitch up Blitzen himself. His setter, Toady, had treed the Negro in the barn. Jeebso hung from a rafter while Toady waited patiently below, licking his chops.

"Toady!" Doc Juniper snapped. "Down, heah muh? Down! And so he'p muh glory, if'n ah ever ketch yo' stickin' them fine teeth in th' wuthless hide o' Jeebso, ah'll turn yo' out on yo' own."

Presently, the white Blitzen comfortably hitched, Doc Juniper and the Negro climbed into the rickety shay. They turned out into the road and headed for the hills, three miles distant, where Scarsta, the Mansfell plantation, was located.

Blitzen was a well-fed and slightly overweight animal who led a placid life. Even the crack of the whip would not disturb him. He never broke into a run, but they did bring him up to a trot.

Ahead of them in the moonlight, Toady barked now and then impatiently, as if urging the horse to come along faster. Blitzen ignored the setter.

They were far from blood and war here; and across the fields, the moonlight lay upon the grass like silver snow. The creak of the shay's rear wheels (which needed axle grease badly), the steady sodden clump of Blitzen as he jogged, Toady's bark now and then, the sweet cries of night birds along the way, and the squeaking of the leather seat—these were the voices of the night; no muttering of artillery.

After these sounds created a silence of their own, as a monotony of sounds will, Doc Juniper tired of the ride and said, "All right, Jeebso. What-all happ'n'd t' Johnny Mansfell? Th' truth, mind yuh, and none o' this fit t' die bus'ness."

"De trouf is all ah knows," Jeebso replied, rolling his eyes. "Miz Granny, she jest say dat Johnny-boy he bad hurt and t'git yo an' bring yo' back wid me. Dat's all ah know, suh, which is de trouf."

Which was no help at all.

MISS GRANNY LOU, however, was waiting on the front steps when the shay drew up in front of the white pillars. She wasted no words. "Amos Juniper," she snapped, "you took yore good time getting hyar. Johnny-boy is above with a broken leg. Go fix it."

Doc Juniper smiled at this rapscallion old shrew. For Granny Lou Mansfell was eighty if she was a day, and Johnny-boy was her great-great grandson, and the apple of her eye.

The doctor marveled at her, standing out here in the cool night air with a shawl around her shoulders. She only came up to his belt, and her face was wrinkled and old.

But her eyes were bright and young and keen, and her tongue was sharper than a two-bladed axe.

"Look heah, Miss Granny," Doc Juniper said politely, "yo' know ah ain't no real doctor. Ah'm a hoss doctor exclusive. Ah ain't got no license t'go practicin' muh arts on human bein's."

"Amos Juniper," she snapped, "you're an ole fool. You can set a hoss's laig, can't you?"

"Better t'shoot 'im," he replied. "But a good vet like me can set a hoss's laig all right."

"Johnny-boy busted his laig," said Granny Lou. "He didn't see them stairs in th' dark. You go fix his laig like you would a hoss, and stop talking."

Her eyes flashed fire.

"Yes, m'am," Doc Juniper said meekly, and went upstairs.

. . . When he came down, some twenty minutes later, he found her sitting in a rocker in the parlor. She beckoned him briefly into a chair and said, "You can smoke, Amos. Could stand the smell of a good cigar in this house. Hasn't been one since Captain Mansfell left."

"How is the captain?" Doc Juniper said.

"Sprightly," said Granny Lou. "Killing lots o' Yankees. How is the boy?"

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Doc Juniper lighted his cigar and puffed before he spoke.

"He'll be all right," he replied mildly. "Them boys—bones all soft anyhow. He got himself what we calls a green-stick fracture. Yo' know how it is when yo' try to bust a green stick? Won't bust all th' way. Just kinda half-way. That's what he done. Them boys, yo' can't break a bone 'n 'em."

"Thank you," Granny Lou said, rocking in brief sharp jerks. "How much you charging, Amos?"

Doc Juniper looked shocked. "Chargin', ma'm? Avast and belay, ah can't charge nothin' fo' that!"

"Why not?"

"Why not? Because ah'm a hoss doctor, Miss Granny, ah ain't a practicin' medico. How many times do ah have t'tell yo' that? Ah'm liable t'get in trouble, workin' on a human bein' like that."

"You're a fool," Granny Lou said. "I'll pay you five dollars Confederate like I'd pay Talisman Samson. You did the same thing. I don't care about no license, Amos."

"Won't take it," Doc Juniper said.

"And you probably mean it, you stubborn hoss butcher. How are you going to live? I'll reckon business just isn't, eh?"

Doc Juniper sighed. "Matter o' fack, it ain't so good. Ain't any hosses left in town. The army took 'em all. Took livestock, too. And what cows as is givin' milk in th' vicinity just ain't comin' down with nothin', no black laig or pox or sores or nothin'.

"Truth is, Miss Granny, a vet like me ain't got no bus'ness right now."

"Exactly what I'm getting at," Granny Lou said sharply. "Junesburg needs a doctor. What's th' difference between a hoss doctor and Talisman Samson? Not much. It was always you helped him take out th' tonsils and adenoids, and d'liver the babies. Folks are going to be wanting a doctor and you'll be the only one round."

"Can't do it."

"Who's to stop you, if a body wants you and knows yore a hoss doctor? Who's the one to speak no?"

"Well, the mayor—"

"Gone to war."

"Sho', but theah's Chris Lambert who's may'rin' now."

"My own son-in-law by marriage!"

Doc Juniper puffed on the cigar and began to smile. "And yo' could handle 'im, eh, Miss Granny?"

He coughed. "Well, ah ain't sayin' yes an' ah won't say no. If'n a body comes t'me askin' help, ah'll give it an' charge hereafter. But ah ain't practicin', mind yo'."

Granny Lou smiled. "That's fine. Folks'll rest better. You won't take money. How about sugar?"

"It's scarce," said Doc Juniper. "An' expensive."

That was how he came to minister unto Junesburg and environs.

AND that was the spring it rained. . . . To the north of Junesburg flowed the Pennesauk, a small and turbulent river. Town officials had once built a spillway across its face to save the face of the slopes beneath it where the teeth of the river ate away the clay.

The spillway had not lasted. It went out with some forgotten spring.

Leaving Junesburg to go north, you crossed the Pennesauk by the old lime kiln bridge. This bridge had been built in 1799, a wooden span from one bank to the other with its bases in land, and no piles in the water.

It was a covered bridge, and even the tread of a horse and two-man shay across its planks shook it from end to end and made terrific echoing racket. There were some folks could identify the horse and wagon in the darkness of the bridge by listening to the sound of the planks beneath the weight.

The bridge needed to be replaced, but it had not been.

. . . Before Doctor Amos Juniper retired that night, he had fixed the leak in the barn over Blitzen's bed. Quite a leak it was, and no chance of finding the faulty shingle in the wet dark; so he

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stuck the ladder up against the wall and climbed to stuff the little hole with cotton.

It was not late then, but there was no point in staying up. The rain was everywhere, thick and milky and hard, the wind bending it against the window-panes and rattling the windows in their grooves. Outside, the night howled down with its own inky weight, and the world was no place to be abroad in. You would have thought that the foul weather would have driven any human being indoors and stilled any human endeavor. Indeed, it did in Junesburg.

But to the north, there was sound. It was almost imperceptible above the fury of the stinging gale; but in case he missed the mutter of it with his ears, Doctor Juniper's feet reminded him that there was a war going on, still going, after four years. For the earth trembled now and then as the cannon spoke through the night and the sea of raindrops.

The windows shook, and Doc Juniper could not repress a shudder.

It was a rotten night to die in. Yet men were out in it, muddy and soaked, shooting and being shot, while the bright flashes of the heavy artillery cut the darkness mercilessly.

Doc Juniper read by the light of a kerosene lamp for quite a while. There was a draft somewhere, for the wick smoked up the glass pretty badly. He wiped the glass casing off once. Then he resumed his perusal of Gray's *Anatomy*.

Naturally the trade of general practitioner had to be learned. Horses were, after all, slightly different in build than human beings.

He had other volumes on the table which he sometimes studied—*The Art of Midwifery; Fractures and What to Do About Them; Contagious Diseases and their Cures, with Native Potions and Herb Medicines, and Poultices*. You could, he had found, buy a book on almost anything. And they were all different, even in the way they treated identical cases.

The clock on the mantel played the melody of Westminster and stopped half-way. Peering over the tops of his octagonal spectacles, Doc Juniper saw that it was nine thirty and a proper hour to be placing his body deep in a feather-filled mattress beneath the warmth of quilts and sheeting.

He put away his books and took the lamp upstairs with him, leaving his parlor in darkness.

FORTUNATELY, he did not even have time to take off his tie. He had taken his flannel nightshirt off the hook in his closet and had laid it upon the bed, when he heard some one pounding upon the front door.

Whoever it was did not conserve strength, and the old door rattled on its hinges alarmingly. Doc Juniper shivered a little. It was that sort of night. He went over to the bureau and opened his Boston bag and took his revolver out of it. He cocked the revolver cautiously, then took the lamp in his other hand and descended the stairs.

When he opened the door, he couldn't see anyone for a moment because the man outside was blacker than the night. Then the xanthic hue of the lamplight fell upon a Negro's long angular face; and Doc Juniper gasped, "Hamilton! Come in heah quick!"

The door slammed shut, and Doc Juniper slid the bolt to keep the door from rattling. The bolt had a steadying effect. He put the lamp on the table and carefully let the hammer of the pistol down, using both thumbs. He laid the gun on the table and rubbed his hands briskly, glad to be rid of the thing.

"Now then, Ham," he said quietly, "ah reckon it's news?"

"Yassuh," Hamilton said solemnly.

He was a big darky with no neck at all. His bullet head sat right on his shoulders. It was hairless. His lips were big and thick, and his nose was flat. His ears looked ridiculous, so small for that head.

"De time's cum," Ham said. "Miz Minnie, she done sent me daown hyar fo' yo, suh."

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"How'd yo' come?" Doc Juniper said. "Yo' have a hoss?"

"Ain' got no hoss, suh," said Ham. "Ah cum 'foot. It sho' is some night, boss. Heaben cryin' lak a pickaninny."

"Yo' came all th' way afoot?" Doc Juniper said in horror. "Why, come about, Ham, that's more'n six miles from th' Hollow! In this heah storm? Full glory, yo' must've swum some o' th' way; it's raining'."

"It mighty bad," Ham said, his big mouth jerking. "River risin' fit t'sweep off'n th' lime kiln. Dey's water in de Hollow comin' up fas'. Mebbe it rech de haouse soon. We bettuh go, suh. Yass."

Doc Juniper thought so too. It did not occur to him that he was leaving the snug warmth and dryness of his home. A moment ago, he was to have slept in a comfortable bed; now he was going out into the gale.

But the psychology of a practitioner is such that he was not even aware of slight disappointment. You get used to such things; and Minnie Jones had been on his mind for the past week.

With oils wrapped around him, Ham carrying his bag, his own pistol stuck in his belt, they left the house. Doc Juniper locked the front door and shielded his face from the blast of wind and stinging rain.

They groped their way back to the barn, and he found his feet instantly soaked with black water, his shoes filthy with red mud.

In the barn, they hitched Blitzen to the shay. Toady, the setter, started barking at the prospect of an exciting jaunt into the night. He liked water. Doc Juniper threw a poncho over Blitzen's white back. It was merely a gesture. He knew the wind would drive the rain under it.

Then, ready, he and Ham climbed into the shay and they started out.

The tassels of the shay's top rippled when the first gusts struck it, and Doc Juniper said, "We're goin' t'be lucky if we get this heah shay back in one piece."

They went north on Main Street for the covered bridge across the Penesauk River. The mud was ghastly in the street, and there was deep water in the lower pockets.

"Heard any war news?" Doc Juniper asked, cupping a hand across his mouth as he spoke, for the howling wind tried to pluck the words from his lips and snatch them out into the blackness.

"Yassuh," Ham yelled back. "Dey's Yankees comin' close t' de Hollow day b' day. Seen a pair prowlin' wid hosses yest'day, lookin' mighty mean."

Ahead of them, as they descended Pope's Hill toward the bridge, they could hear Toady barking lustily; and as they reached the bottom he came splashing back through water and nipped at Blitzen's legs.

The water here was six inches deep. It went to Blitzen's knees as they continued. Ahead of them the black bulk of the lime kiln bridge loomed in the darkness, visible only because of the white water around it.

DOC JUNIPER stared aghast. The Penesauk was up—way up over the '61 level which swept the spillway into oblivion. The water around Blitzen's knees, he saw in horror, was river water, the swirling current of the Penesauk itself which had come up eighteen feet to the very level of the bridge itself.

"Lawd God. . . ." Ham breathed. The whites of his eyes stuck out gruesomely. "De riber—she risin' fas'! She cum up fi' foot since ah run dem plank 'while back, dat's a fack."

"Wheah's Toady?" Doc Juniper gasped. "This heah water's too deep fo' him t'walk. He must be swimmin' by now!" He bellowed for the dog but there was no answer, and Toady did not show himself.

"What yo' gwine t'do, suh?"

"Well," Doc Juniper said, taking a breath—a long shivery breath—"th' bridge is still theah. Ah reckon we better high-tail 'cross it while it lasts and then worry 'bout gettin' back t'town later on when we got a cause to worry. Giddap, Blitzen boy, giddap 'cross th' bridge an' make it fast, boy, make it fast!"

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Blitzen neighed noisely and turned his head around, but did not move.

"Giddap, giddap!" Doc Juniper said fervently, watching the waters rising with each second.

Blitzen neighed again and did not move.

Doc Juniper grunted a mild cuss; took the whip from its slot at his right and cracked it out with a snap on Blitzen's rump. The horse winced under the shot of it; made no sound, but made no attempt to move forward again.

Before Doc Juniper could try the whip once more, there was a faint rumble, then a groaning roar, and finally a clap of close thunder.

Suddenly they saw it go, the old lime kiln bridge which had weathered the river and time since 1790. It was plucked from its bases bodily, and as the turbulent rapids caught it in midsection, it was snapped in half with a terrific splintering of wood.

One section floated down and quickly out of sight while the other jammed in heavy trees on the far side and quickly went to pieces. It disintegrated, floating off in myriad parts.

And in the shay they sat breathless and horrified; and Doc Juniper began to cry out, "Toady, Toady! Heah dawg!"

Blitzen stood stockstill, unmoved by the spectacle, as if to say that he had known it was coming and had shown the fact by his stubbornness.

Then a stillness seemed to settle around them. Actually, the roaring river and howling night were still voicing their fury, but the din of the crashing lime kiln made them sound remote.

A dog was barking somewhere.

"Theah!" Doc Juniper exclaimed sharply. "Theah's Toady! Wheah's it comin' from, Ham?"

"Saound lak frum 'cross de riber," Ham said.

"It does, it does," said Doc Juniper. "That fool dog, he probably swum across the water o' th' bridge and reached t'other side. Dogs ain't got hoss sense like ole Blitzen!"

He stood up in the shay and shouted as loud as he could, "Toady! The Hollow! Go t'th' Hollow—Miss Minnie Jones' house! Ah'm comin' later!"

Toady answered him once with a sharp bark, and then was silent.

"Doctuh, suh," said Ham, "ah's skeered. Dis water, she's risin' hard, and th' way she risin', she mus' be mos' up to de front of de haouse in de Hollow."

"Umm," Doc Juniper agreed. "Ah expect we better go west to th' Bluff an' then leave th' shay and take th' footbridge over t'other side afoot. That bridge, she'll be too high fo' flood. We got to move fast, Ham. How long since yo' left Minnie?"

"Three hours, suh."

"Umm. That's bad. We got t' hurry, son, we sure do."

THE last that Doctor Amos Juniper saw of Blitzen and the shay was a memorable sight. The white horse stood there—immobile, in the rain—atop the limestone bluff above the Penesauk, some four miles west of town.

A bolt of lightning showed the majestic old animal, proudly holding his head up as he waited by the entrance of the footbridge for his master to come back at some future time.

The footbridge went across the Penesauk some fifty feet high. Ham couldn't be persuaded to try it first, but he followed Doc Juniper hastily enough, still carrying the bag.

Doc Juniper had taken one of the oil lamps off the shay and brought it along, for he considered the tragic possibility of stepping into a water hole which might have a deep bottom. One such step and a man might never come up.

All the time, it rained, rained in unbroken sheets of thin milky glass, heavy and pungent and awful.

"Dey's one udder t'ing," Ham said suddenly as they started down a mild slope before they could reach the rise which would take them into the Hollow. "De stream. She was swoll, all swoll, when ah cum aout. Mebbe now she cuts us off'n."

"Th' stream?" Doc Juniper said. "Yo'

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mean that little puddle yo' can jump 'cross down heah?"

"Warn' no puddul when ah cum aout," Ham cried, rolling his eyes wildly. "She knock me down wid de fo'ce. She six foot wide and hipdeep when ah cum 'cross her 'fore."

"Umm, umm," said Doc Juniper, and they continued on down.

Soon they reached water. Almost like surf, it curved against the ground on which they stood, upon which it had never curved before. This was the puddle.

Doc Juniper raised the lantern and peered across. It was fifteen feet to the other side, and the stream raged. Hipdeep when Ham had come, it was probably shoulder-deep now, and difficult to swim indeed. Well-nigh impossible.

Then they nearly jumped out of their skins.

A voice came out of the darkness behind them, and it snapped in crisp accents, "Hands up, the two of you! You may consider yourselves my prisoners, and you —the old duck with the lamp—don't pull on that gun in your belt or I'll kill you!"

"Oh lawd," Ham groaned, wheeling around.

Doc Juniper turned, startled, and held up the lamp staring at the man. It was a Federal soldier, in blue uniform which the wet had made black. But the gold braid and buttons glittered from the lamplight, as did the revolver in the man's hand.

Doc Juniper saw the man was a captain. He was seated upon a brown horse of magnificent stature. Doc Juniper had not forgotten he was a horse doctor, and he could not help but admire the build of the beast.

"Well," said Doc Juniper, "th' lamp says it's a Yankee soldier, but ah can't believe it. Not even a Yankee would be crazy 'nuff t'go wanderin' round the hills on a night like thisa-one fo' th' takin' of prisoners. Heh! Ham and me, we ain't much in th' way o' prisoners either, me bein' a skin o' bones, and Ham just a wuthless black boy."

The face of the Fed was still stern, but there was some uneasiness in his eyes. "Why are you carrying that gun? Noncombatants should not be armed. What monkey business are you up to, you old goat?"

"Tryin' t'start a forest fire to burn th' Yanks out'n th' Wilderness," said Doc Juniper drily. "Bad conditions fo' it though.

"Now looka heah, Mistuh Yankee, ah got troubles 'nuff without yo'. Ah'm th' general practitioner o' these parts, and ah got a patient up this hill and down t'other side in th' Hollow. Ham's heah t'say so. Minnie Jones, she's havin' a baby, and she's alone and it's her fust and she's mighty sceered. Ah got t'get ovuh theah."

"Hand me that bag, boy," the Fed said. Ham handed it to him and the Fed opened it. There were the instruments. He closed it again and smiled faintly.

"Let's have your gun, Doctor."

"OH, SHUCKS, heah," Doc Juniper said, handing over the hoss pistol. "On'y carry th' dang thing on 'count o' th' bobcats when ah'm goin' 'bout my business. They're thicker'n rain sometimes.

"Looka heah, son, ah'm old 'nuff t'be yo' pap. Ain't yo' goin' t'call off'n yo' war tonight and let me get t' Minnie. Havin' babies ain't no picnic. Not even fo' mares like that beauty yo' ridin'."

"My name is McCloud," the Fed said suddenly. "Captain McCloud. . . . What's yours?"

"Amos Juniper. This heah is Ham. Ah practice in Junesburg. Usta be just a vet, but Doc Samson, he went t'war, and theah wasn't no kind o' doc left 'round but me, so ah'm doc till he gets back."

"He daid," said Ham. "Ah heerd he daid. He ain't gwine t'cum back."

"No," said Doc Juniper. "Ah hadn't heard that."

Captain McCloud finally smiled and seemed to relax. He put his gun away.

"To tell you the truth," he said, "I was out scouting for a route to flank—anyway I got lost, caught in the storm. I was

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afraid of running into rebel scouts, so I just hung here in the woods waiting for daylight so that I could see where I was going."

"Where you come from?"

"Allen's Hill."

"No!" said Doc Juniper. "You Yanks captured Allen's Hill?"

'We sure have," Captain McCloud said. We're on the march. Lee is retreating. This war'll be over before you could grow a beard, and I mean a short beard. . . . Where am I anyhow?"

"Yo' neah Junesburg, son."

"Junesburg? I came down pretty far. Thanks for the information. How are you going to get across this freshet?"

Doc Juniper shook his head. He was worried. "T'tell th' truth, ah don't know exactly. She sure is ragin' and ah ain't no spring chicken. Ham heah, he might swim it, but not me, not at my age."

Captain McCloud studied the torrent. "If the darky could swim it," he said finally, "I think I could take you over with me on the horse." He coughed. "He's a brute, this beast; he could almost jump it."

Doc Juniper looked pleased. "That's right kindly o' yo', suh," he said. "Ah just got t'get t'Minnie Jones. Between havin' a baby and worryin' about floatin' down th' Hollow, ah reckon she got her hands full."

"Ah can' swim dat 'lone," Ham wailed. "Ah jes' can'."

"Hang onto the horse's tail, then," Captain McCloud said. "Climb up here with me, Doctor. You hold the lantern, I'll hold the bag. Hang onto the tail, back there. Here we go!"

The torrent struck them, and they were swept down from their original place of entry. But in only seconds, the beast found solid earth and dug in and held. The next instant, thoroughly wet, they were scrambling up the slope on the other side, Ham getting his face muddy because he wouldn't let go of that tail even on dry land.

The Hollow was really Gopher Pass, a long irregular valley which had once been the bed of some unknown and long defunct river which had cut its route through the soft limestone back when men saw mastodons instead of elephants. Through one point of the pass, cliffs rose precipitiously on each side, and the dry river bed was very narrow.

But at the point where Doc Juniper and his friends stood after climbing up from the "puddle," the pass became the Hollow, for it was a hollow.

The old bed ran between two sloping hills on either side, two green fertile hills, studded with birch and butternut; with light-wooded buckeyes and grained oaks; with coarse chestnuts and red cedars; and ash, poplar, and maples. Far down at the bottom of the Hollow lay the rhododendron shrubs.

Or rather, that was where they had been, for it was plain to Doc Juniper when he reached the top of the southern hill and looked down into the black valley that the shrubs were gone and there would be no gorgeous clusters of blossoms that spring.

THE Hollow was a river bed again, as it had been in the past ages. The faint trickle of cold clear water which sometimes found its way across the rocks at the bottom, and which instantly dried come warm weather, was an unleashed monster.

Doc Juniper and Ham and Captain McCloud went slowly down the slide of the hill, looking for the shack. Ham got his bearings finally and the three of them brought up on the edge of the inland sea.

"De shack," said Ham tragically, "she gwine. She wuz down thyar and de water done cober her up." Tears wet his eyes. "Miz Minnie—"

"Come, come, boy," Doc Juniper snapped. "What kind o' fool do yo' think she was? Just t'sit theah and wait t'be washed away? She got out'n theh when th' flood hit her doorstep, yo' can count on that. But wheah?"

He held the lantern up and they peered

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around them at the appalling darkness.

Suddenly Doc Juniper whispered, "Toady! Toady boy!" And then he raised his voice in a sharp cry. "Toady! Toady! Wheah are yo'?"

The setter answered him instantly, the bark coming across the wind with amazing clarity and sharpness.

"I heard a hound," said Captain McCloud quickly. "Barking up there." He pointed toward the ridge of the hill they had just descended, but more eastward. "There it is again! Louder!"

Doc Juniper smiled. "That's muh dog. He's comin' t'get us. He went off with Minnie when she lef' th' shack."

He was right. The red setter showed himself in the perimeter of the lamplight in the next few seconds.

Toady looked thoroughly happy and was soaked to the skin, his long hair, particularly under the belly, hanging straight down. He cavorted around Doc Juniper's legs, licked the doctor's face, accepted Captain McCloud without question, and nipped the horse twice playfully. The horse didn't seem to mind.

"All right, Toady," Doc Juniper said. "Take us up to Minnie."

Toady was agreeable, and they followed the setter up the black hill for a long distance. Presently they reached a small glade where the hill leveled. They could still feel the rain in there; but not as much, for the trees overhead were thick and umbrella-like.

Doc Juniper's lamp was the only light in the glade. By it, they found Minnie. But they heard her before they saw her, groaning sadly. And then a man's voice joined them, sharp and meaningful.

"All right, yo' Yankee dudhead," it said, "stick up yo' han's and prepare to s'rrenduh yo' weapons. Yo' may consider yo'self muh prisoner!"

The lamplight showed a Confederate captain standing on the edge of the glade with a pistol in his hand.

Doc Juniper peered. He had never seen that particular uniform or gun before in his life, but the face was very familiar, and he was sure that he had often heard the voice. Of course, he had not seen the face for four years, nor heard the voice either. But still. . . .

"Say," he drawled, holding the lantern up, "is that yo', John Mansfell?"

Captain John Mansfell snapped, "It sho' is, ole billygoat. And who're yo' if'n ah may ask?"

"Why, full an' bye," Doc Juniper said sharply, "ah'm Amos Juniper and billygoat ain't a likely word fo' a man that set yo' boy's laig when yo' and Doc Samson was gone t'war!"

"Is that yo', Juniper?" Captain Mansfell exclaimed. "Bless muh soul, ah couldn' see yo' well in th' darkness. That's Ham with yo' then, and that reduces my prisoners t' one. Fo' it's sho' shootin', he's a Fed by th' color o' his raiment."

Captain McCloud said stiffly, "Captain McCloud, 77th Pennsylvania Volunteers, sir. I'm your prisoner."

"Disarm yo'self."

"Now wait a minute," Doc Juniper said. "Yo' two boys is goin' on like yo' was playin' a game o' soldiers. Supposin' yo' both stop this nonsense and go t'work with me heah.

"McCloud, suh, just hush yo' mouth. Captain Mansfell, suh, ah don't think it's an ethical way fo' a southern gentleman t'act, makin' a prisoner out'n a Yank what was good 'nuff to cart me cross stream and down heah to tend t'Minnie.

"Full glory, John Mansfell, it ain't a night fo' war. This Yank, he coulda been miles away if'n he hadn't gone helpin' me t'get t'Minnie."

"Is that a fact?" Captain Mansfell said, lowering his gun. He raised it again. "Sorry, Juniper, but theah's a war goin' on and this heah man is in my territory and a prisoner."

"THEAH ain't a war goin' on tonight," Doc Juniper said. "There's only a poor soul bringin' a new life into th' world in a ragin' storm, and ah'll have no nonsense in th' doin' o' it. Yo' both gentlemen, him for the helpin' o' me, and

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yo' fo' th' helpin' o' Minnie heah alone with Toady."

Captain Mansfell lowered his gun and stuck it in his holster.

"Yo' word not t' draw on me, suh," he said.

"My word," said Captain McCloud.

They stood facing each other, looking each other over. Then they slowly relaxed, and smiled at each other. Mansfell was thinking that a Yankee this close didn't look like an ogre, and McCloud was thinking that here was just another man in the wrong uniform.

Doc Juniper meanwhile went over to where Minnie Jones lay. Ham had cradled his wife's head in his hands as she groaned.

Doc Juniper went to work, sticking the lamp by his side, and presently he yelped, "All hands on deck!" (He who had never seen a deck.)

"We got t'keep her dry and we got t'keep her warm. Theah's matches in muh bag. Some one make a fire. Theah's a poncho on that hoss. Some one stretch it out'n overhaid. Everybody work fast 'cause theah ain't goin' t'be much time."

They cleared for action. McCloud unfurled the poncho which he had slipped from his shoulders and he began to make it fast to the four trees which bounded the glade. When he finished, the poncho was stretched taut over the prostrate wife of Ham like a tent without sides or a front and back. Just the roof.

Captain Mansfell, on the other hand, got the lucifers from the oilskin packet in Doc Juniper's bag. Somewhere, in the densest part of the woods beneath leaves where the rain could not fall, he found dry kindling. A touch of kerosene on this from the lamp, and he soon had a small fire blazing.

"Hot water," Doc Juniper grunted.

Mansfell went out where the trees thinned and soon came back with water in his army utensils; set it to boiling over the flaming fire.

"She gwine t'die, she gwine t'die," Hamilton Jones wailed.

No one paid any attention to him.

"I'll wager yo'," said Captain Mansfell to Captain McCloud, "that it's a gal. Minnie's just lak havin' a gal."

"Sir," said McCloud with a smile, "a girl couldn't stand being born on a night like this. She'd change her mind and wait. Only a boy could be so stubborn as to come into the world in such weather. A boy."

"Heah yo' two," Doc Juniper gasped, "hold'n her down by th' shoulders 'cause soon we're goin' t'see. And Ham, stop prayin' so hard, ah can't heah muhself think!"

In a few minutes, by the light of the lamp, they saw Doc Juniper raise the baby, a little plump chocolate drop who instantly screwed up his face at the cold air and let out a sharp and baleful cry.

Doc Juniper chuckled loudly and said, "Hefty little fella! Weighs nine if'n he weighs an ounce! Gentleman, it's a boy!"

He motioned to the others. "Keep her warm; she got t'be kept warm while I work on him!"

Army blankets came out of knapsacks, and in a twinkling Minnie was swathed in them as the sweat rolled off her face and she shivered.

"NOW," cried Doc, having severed the umbilical cord and tied it, "we got to have somethin' to wrap this fella up in! He got to be kept warm! Ah'm swathin' him in cotton, but we need mo'—"

Captain Mansfell went to his pack, and Captain McCloud did the same. Mansfell came back first. He held a small flag in his hand. The stars and bars unfurled as he reached Doc Juniper.

"This is th' on'y dry thing ah got left," Captain Mansfell said. "Muh wife made it fo' me and sent it t'me after Gettysburg. Heah yo' are."

Doc Juniper snatched the flag away and hastily wrapped it around the baby. "It's raw and cold," he said. "We need more'n this—"

Captain McCloud came back, and they saw he had taken off his uniform coat and was holding it. "There's nothing dry in my

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pack," he said. But I had the poncho on while riding, and my coat inside is warm and dry. Here you are."

Doc Juniper snatched it eagerly and wrapped it around the baby. Minnie Jones came to then and said, "What is'n it?"

"A boy," said Ham. "Lawd God, whatta boy!"

Doc Juniper gave her the baby, and she could just see his round brown face, topped by a hairless head. She could just see it through the blue of the uniform and the red and blue of the Confederate flag.

"Dawgone," said Captain Mansfell, "this'n calls fo' a celebration. If'n ah had some cawn—"

"I've got a spot of rum left," Captain McCloud said. He ran to the horse and brought back his canteen. "You first, sir."

Mansfell swigged. Doc Juniper swigged. Ham swigged. And then McCloud himself swigged. "To the health of—what's his name?"

"What's yo' son's name, Ham?" Doc Juniper said.

"Don' know," Ham said. "Ain't figgered one yet."

They sat there and built up the fire. Beyond the glade, in the open Hollow, the wind began to die, and the rain fell off. The river would go down quickly, once the torrent passed. By morning, there might be only a stream, and by noon perhaps a brook.

It was snug and warm and dry under the trees; and beneath the poncho Minnie Jones, in her army blankets, smiled at her pickaninny.

"Well," said Doc Juniper presently, "ah reckon ah seen a miracle heah tonight."

"Oh hellan'gone," said Captain Mansfell. "Ain't no miracle with babies. Naturalest thing in th' world. Just bad weather fo' one."

"Ah seen a miracle," said Doc Juniper. "If'n Ham an' me'd been alone, maybe Minnie and that baby both'd died. Ah reckon yo' two fellas, yo' don't see th' significance.

"Heah yo' two been fightin' a war against each other. Tryin' t'kill each other. And all on account o' a little darky baby, we're sittin' 'round heah like ol' friends."

The two soldiers looked at each other and then grinned in an embarrassed sort of way.

"Oh, I guess Virginians are all right," McCloud said.

"Ah've revised my opinion o' Yanks," said Mansfell.

"You th' North," said Doc Juniper, pointing at McCloud.

"And you th' South," pointing at Mansfell, "united heah fo' th' birth o' a 'Merican citizen. Doggone if'n it ain't th' way it ought'n t'be! Yo' both Americans, and me, and that little fella, all Americans. Damn ole silly war, an' th' sooner it's ovuh th' bettuh!

"That baby theah, he's th' symbol o' th' whole thing. Swatched in a reb flag and a Fed uniform. North and South, all wrapped up 'n one. Th' United States. That's th' way it's got t'be."

There was a silence. Then:

"You're right," McCloud said.

"Ah reckon so," Mansfell said.

Ham rose, his black face shining. "Capt' Mansfell, suh, what yo' fust name?"

"It's John, Ham, don't yo' know that?"

"And yo' suh, Capt' Yank, what's yo' fust name?"

"Stephen," said McCloud. "Why?"

Ham said with pride, " 'Cause ah jes' got th' name fo' muh baby. Th' No'th an' th' South all wrap up'n one lak Doc say. Ah'm gwine t'call dat boy Mistuh John Stephen Juniper Jones!"

•

That was the night of March twenty-ninth, eighteen sixty-five. You already know how, approximately two weeks later, the war ended at Appomattox, and the dream of brotherhood which was met in that glade on the Hollow while the wind raged and the rain beat down, came true and endured.

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Intent on igniting the gas, Humrelly forgot the Antarkan behind him

Lords of Creation

By EANDO BINDER

WHEN Homer Ellory, young twentieth century scientist, awakes in the year 5000, he is amazed to discover that the world has returned to the Stone Age. North America's supply of ore has been exhausted, and the tribe of Noraks dwell primitively under the leadership of John Darm. With him, with wise old Sem Onger and with the warrior Mal Radnor, Homer Ellory becomes fast friends; and he is strongly attracted to the lovely Sharina.

Then Homer Ellory learns that civilization does still exist—in the Land of Antarka. The Lords of Antarka descend upon the Noraks in their rocket ships every few months, to carry away supplies and slaves. Ellory (called Humrelly) manages to produce metal from a supply of ferrous oxide; and armed with swords, the Noraks vanquish all the other tribes, enrolling the captives in their army. With this huge legion of liberty Homer Ellory hopes to defy the Antarkans; but the weapons of the rocket ship swiftly quell the rebellion, and Ellory and Sharina are carried away to Antarka.

THERE, in that vast city below the surface of the earth, they are the guests, and prisoners, of the beautiful Ermaine, Lady of Lillamra. She is deeply interested in Humrelly, the man from the past; and her beauty fascinates him, in spite of himself. But when

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Sharina tells him that Ermaine has fallen in love with him, Ellory insists that the cold, lovely queen is merely playing with him—that soon he will be sentenced to death. . . .

CHAPTER XX

THE REVELS

"YOU skipped showing us the lowest level of all," Ellory reminded Ermaine, the Lady of Lillamra, the next day, already guessing the reason. "What's down there—your Outland slaves?"

"Servants," she corrected blandly. "Their living quarters." She looked at his grim face. "Come," she said reluctantly.

The lowermost level, resting a mile down on bedrock, though only slightly dank, made Ellory mutter the word, "Dungeon!"

It was well lighted, however. Neat rows of tiered little houses, with sodded areas, spread in all directions. The air was just as fresh here as above. Shifts of workmen returning and leaving did not show maltreatment. They looked well-fed, well taken care of.

Ellory was forced to admit, inwardly, that it wasn't the grinding sort of slavery that spotted past history with black pages.

"Fairly decent, isn't it, Humrelly?" Ermaine said. She went on with a faint shrug as he maintained a stony silence. "Frankly, though, their lot was harsher, at the beginning. But in the past six or seven centuries, they have been treated well."

"That isn't the issue!" charged Ellory. "What's your moral right in the first place to have them as servants?"

"They lead a safer, saner life here," countered the Antarkan girl urbanely. "What did they have in their former life? Senseless border wars, back-breaking toil in the fields, lack of necessities. Here they have better clothes, shorter working hours, implements of metal for their comfort—"

Echo from the past! Ellory grinned mirthlessly at the girl.

"Don't try to throw ideological dust in my eyes!" he interposed. "I heard the cream of it, three thousand years ago." He went on steadily. "You know, in your heart, that it's a substitution of shallow well-being for freedom. You can't get away from that. Your propaganda fools even yourselves. Or else, like true realists, you argue with tongue in cheek. I suppose you've done this for their sake, not because it happens to benefit you!"

Ermaine outfaced it without a flicker.

"You're still on trial, Humrelly," she warned him coldly. "Your arguments happen to be an ideology too, not a fundamental truth."

Ellory felt helpless. He hadn't won a point yet, in this strange, undefined mental duel with the Antarkan girl.

"How did it all begin?" he asked, hoping to strike at the roots of their propaganda.

"Well—"

Ermaine thought a moment. "That first century of upbuilding was done entirely by Antarkans. Half the people worked at the cities, half in their homeland, raising food. The transfer of supplies across the oceans like that became cumbersome. With the development of rocket craft, and the flame-weapon, the solution came. The Outland was conscripted, under threat of attack, to supply food, and then servants. They yielded. All our people moved to Antarka. Life here became stabilized, easy, luxurious."

Ellory had to admire her. She hadn't pulled her punches. It was realism, cold and efficient.

"And why not?" she concluded. "Life is meant to be lived beautifully, by those who can achieve it."

A THOUSAND years of oligarchic rule, and its corresponding psychology. There was no hope of battering it down, Ellory saw clearly. And why should he argue with her, in the first place?

"How many Outlanders do you have in each city?" he asked.

Ermaine glanced at him quickly, mockingly.

"Not enough for revolt, Humrelly! About two hundred thousand in each city

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of a million Antarkans. The total population of the Outland is about two hundred million. Each ninth month we take ten young men, at the age of twenty, from every million of Outland population. This keeps exact pace with the death-rate of our servant group, whose average span is thirty-five years, from age twenty to age fifty-five. It also keeps pace with the gestation period of the human race, so that the Outlanders are not drained too heavily of their young."

Her voice was impersonal, as if she spoke of coins or bales of wool.

Earth's grand total of two billions in 1940, then, had sunk to a mere two hundred million, through the Dark Time. These two hundred million were dominated by the ten million of Antarka. Every nine months, two thousand Outlander youths were brought to Antarka, to work for an average of thirty-five years before natural death.

Ellory darted his eyes about the Outlander community suddenly. He saw no children playing in the park areas, although women's faces peered dully from windows.

Ermaine saw his glance.

"They have no children. They are all sterilized. It is trouble enough raising our own children. Their women, among other things, are nursemaids for our babies."

The cold, scientific logic of it struck Ellory in the face. Youths ready to work, at the age of twenty, all parental care already invested in them in their home world, brought here as if they were assembled machines. Thirty-five man-years of usefulness in them, in return for simple shelter and food. The greatest bargain in human labor, in all history! A piracy of human lives!

"I see the storm-clouds in your face already, Humrelly. Save your tongue. I weary of denunciations, based on conditions and beliefs obtaining three thousand years ago. Come now. There are the ten upper levels to view."

Ellory subsided for a simple reason. He pictured himself as a "radical" of three thousand years ago, on a soap-box at Columbus Circle, exhorting a crowd of tuxedoed "capitalists" to end the economic slavery of the "working man." There, he would have been speaking against a few centuries of industrial tradition. Here, against a thousand long years of tradition still more firmly entrenched.

"The ten upper levels," Ermaine explained, "hold our living quarters and centers. We have something of a caste here. By heredity, the highest-born occupy the top level, and run all government affairs. My family has carried the royal mark since the beginning of Antarka.

"Each lower level is a step down in prestige and family. Yet they all, except the top-level class, work at the machines, the lower down the more hours. Those on the tenth level are called Commons. They do most of our policing, technical work and scientific routine."

"Is there much research, in new fields?" Ellory's interest was more than casual.

"Little," vouched Ermaine. "All problems have been solved. Their main duty is to increase efficiency, if they can, so that our coal and metal supplies will last longer."

"And when they are finally gone?"

Ermaine waved a careless hand. "Time enough for that consideration—two thousand years. That is not the wink of an eye, you know."

"I was buried three thousand," murmured Ellory, "and awoke to find my world gone! If you were buried two, Ermaine—"

Ignoring the implication, the Antarkan girl went on.

"All Antarkans mingle socially at the fifth level. But those of the upper four never descend to the lower five, and vice versa. I'll take you now to the fifth level. I've not been there for some months."

"Slumming," Ellory called it, and explained to her. It brought an amused smile to her lips.

The fifth level hummed with what Ellory mentally labeled "night life", though it was the day period.

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VARIOUS great balls were in progress. Orchestras—of Commons, Ellory learned—ground out music that even to his untrained ear was mediocre. A monotonous four-four rhythm dominated every theme. Their dancing was stilted, less appealing even than the most savage prancing would have been. Ellory grinned to think what a sensation a swing-band of his time would cause here.

Everywhere, the Lords and Ladies of Antarka sought social amusement in one grand round of parties. Liquor was imbibed freely, though seldom to the point of intoxication. Ellory sat at a table, sipping a heady champagne, and watched a dramatic play of love intrigue so involved and shoddy that he instantly knew it was the key to their romantic life.

"We are more decorous in the upper levels," apologized Ermaine, watching him. Vaguely, Ellory was relieved.

Later he found himself dancing with the Antarka girl-queen. The full power of her nearness overwhelmed him suddenly. She was supple in his arms. The perfume in her argent hair stung his blood.

"Humrelly," she murmured in his ear, "I'm beginning to be sorry you led the revolt. You don't deserve to—die!"

He steeled himself against showing any reaction. That was the way to spoil her cruel little game. They went back to their table.

Ellory suddenly leaped ahead, for the last half of the distance. He grasped the shoulder of the jaunty Antarkan standing over Sharina, pulling at her arm. He spun him around.

"Get away from here, before I—" Ellory said savagely, enraged to see the pained flush on Sharina's face.

"She's just an Outland gal—" began the Antarkan, and then Ellory's fist leaped out in a short-arm punch that rocked the Antarkan off his heels. He went down with a glassy stare.

Instant quiet came over the ballroom.

"He's that revolt-monger, the man from the past!" shrilled a voice suddenly. Antarkan men moved up threateningly.

"Stop!"

Ermaine, Queen of Lillamra, said it quietly, but they paused. Two men in uniform, with flame-guns, came up—Commons again, Ellory surmised.

"Resume the dancing," Ermaine commanded.

Men scattered. The babble and artificial gaiety bubbled up again. Ellory wondered how men could change so suddenly, guns and queen to the contrary. It was almost as if their first hostile move against Ellory had been an instinctive reaction on their part, dying as soon as it was born.

"Let's go," Ermaine said in annoyance. "The upper levels are quieter."

But only in degree, Ellory found. The pace of revelry was slower, but as widespread. What mad spirit had gripped these people to indulge in one continuous round of sham enjoyment? Even in Ermaine's more sedate level, the blue-blooded Antarkans played hard, as if each moment were precious. And yet before them stretched lifetimes of a more absolute security and luxury than any other human beings had ever enjoyed.

By bedtime, Ellory had drawn a great truth from what he had seen. He slept more peacefully than he had since the horror on the Hudson.

CHAPTER XXI

RENOUNCE THE OUTLAND

ERMAINE did not appear the next morning at the usual time. The Outlander attendant told Ellory she had asked that he remain in his room. Shrugging, Ellory took to reading a finely-bound book. It was dainty, shallow verbiage that the most susceptible editor of the twentieth century would have rejected.

Ermaine came in, late in the afternoon, with Sharina. She faced them with a more serious expression than her imperturable features had ever shown before.

"Humrelly," she began slowly, "you've seen all of Lillamra City. The others are the same. What do you think of Antarka now?"

Ellory stood up before her, drawing a long breath, preparing to launch out.

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"Wait, before you speak!" She paused, then: "I think I'll tell you first. You are offered a place in our civilization—as one of the Lords of Antarka, with all privileges! The Outland Council have agreed. Renounce the Outland, take up life here, as one of us. Either that or life imprisonment!"

Ellory was staggered. "Not death—in either case?" he gasped. This upset his whole theory, that Ermaine had been playing with an inevitably doomed man.

"I don't believe it!" he grunted.

"It's true." There was no hint of mockery in the Antarkan girl's face. "We feel that you deserve better than death for a simple mistake, you who have come from a remote past. Your historical knowledge alone will add to our records. But we can't, of course, let you go on our avowed enemy, either here or in the Outland. You're too dangerous! Well?"

Her tones had been impersonal, unemotional. She might be talking of whether he should wear a different suit.

Ellory straightened up.

"Ermaine, listen to me," he began quietly. "I'll tell you what I think of Antarka. For a thousand years you Antarkans have been in the lap of luxury. You are decadent, stagnant, spiritually dead. You were a truly vigorous people when you first settled in Antarka, building a civilization. Then a terrible mistake was made—the conscription of the Outland.

"It's tyranny, from start to finish. But worse than your sin against the Outlanders, is your sin against yourselves! For you've buried yourselves in absolute sterility of mind."

"Indeed?" Ermaine's lidded eyes revealed no reaction. "Just because we don't have wars, preaching reformers, and a hundred and one different philosophies pulling at odds? Have you stopped to think, Humrelly, that we have reached the perfect state? There is no need for what you would misname 'vigor of mind'. We live life beautifully, as some of your own poets once chanted was the acme of human life!"

"Beautifully! I'll tell you something, Ermaine, that will make you jump. Even with advance warning you'll jump. You're utterly bored—as you once hinted. All Antarka has been bored stiff for centuries. You're all sick of each other, sick of safety, security, idleness, soft living. Your music sings out the same song, and your literature. Antarka—fluff of the ages, man's zero point in endeavor. You are chained in a vicious little circle that you'd mortgage your souls to change, if you'd only realize it. You play hard because you're afraid to stop and realize there is nothing else.

"Even a war would be preferable, wouldn't it, Ermaine? Even a good, healthy rebellion in the Outland, instead of one you can so easily stop. You told me that yourself, and I was a fool not to see the truth sooner. An age-long ennui came down from your fathers, like a stuffy cloak, and it'll go down to your children.

"That's your whole horizon—complete boredom, to the day you die. Years and years of it! Why, even Sharina here has lived more in her short time than a half dozen of you Lords and Ladies."

ERMAINE'S eyes, wide at first, became indolently amused. "Humrelly, you amaze me. I did not suspect such eloquence in your big body and blunt mind."

Ellory went on, determined to finish.

"There's a solution open. A perfectly simple one. Come out of the grave, into the sun! Release all your slaves, do things for yourself. More, go out into the Outland world and labor with them and for them. Strive to bring them civilization. The tremendous odds against this are just the thing to add zest, meaning, fire to your stifled lives. You'd die happy, if you hadn't gained an inch."

Fervent appeal crept into his voice.

"Don't you see, Ermaine? I can't believe you or any of your people are entirely lost. I can't believe it—of you! You've got to do something—to work! Don't you see, Ermaine? You must!"

He stared into her eyes. Was there a spark there, the same spark that he had seen lying fallow in the Outland people?

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Did the slight glow in her eyes, the faintly parted lips mean anything?

"You almost move me, Humrelly!" she said with a trace of eagerness in her tone. "You almost make me vision a new kind of life, a different world—a wonderful—no! What am I saying?"

Her tones became flat, uncompromising. "How emotion fogs the mind! Are you done, Humrelly? Now let me speak. Think over the offer of Lordship in Antarka well. More—"

She moved toward him suddenly, stood close.

In one breathtaking instant, the atmosphere changed subtly. Sharina had stiffened, as if in premonition. Ermaine's manner had oddly altered. Ellory dimly sensed that the two weeks in Lillamra had culminated in this moment.

Ermaine spoke, her azure eyes on his. "This may violate custom of your time, Humrelly, but Lillamra needs a Lord. I have chosen—*you!*"

Ellory saw the new glow in her eyes, the warm, inviting smile on her half-parted lips. He stared as if he had never seen her before.

His mind, now, had become an utter blank. As that day in front of the Antarkan ship, he moved without knowing it. He had pulled Sharina to her feet, enfolded her in his arms.

"This is my answer!" he said with a strange calm, kissing Sharina.

"YOU great fool," Ermaine said quietly. "You love me! A woman knows the signs. Sharina knows, too. Sharina, tell him he loves me!"

Sharina had faintly resisted the kiss. She pushed Ellory away, now, nodding with tight lips.

"What have you done to her, you witch!" Ellory accused the Antarkan girl. "I know my own mind. Sharina knows hers. If this is some trick to save me in spite of myself—"

"No, Humrelly." Ermaine smiled as if at a rebellious child. "You have more in common with this life than with Jon Darm's people. Sharina realizes that too, now. She would never be happy with you or you with her. Your whole minds exist on different planes."

"Don't try to rationalize love away!" Ellory flared. "I love Sharina, not you. At last I'm sure of it. It's my own sentence, but I say it!"

Ermaine seemed hardly to hear.

"More," she said, "Sharina loved Mal Radnor all the time. You merely swept her off her feet, for a while—a great man from the past. Any girl would suffer the same. He does not believe, Sharina. Tell him!"

Sharina's lips quivered. "Yes, Humrelly, she is right. Mal Radnor—oh, if only he were alive—"

"He is!"

Sharina and Ellory stared at the girl of Antarka.

Ermaine went on decisively. "I sent a ship up, checking a vague report that the rebellion's second-in-command was alive. He was found hidden, badly burned, but recovering."

Ellory saw the sudden wild joy in Sharina's face, and he knew that Ermaine had spoken the truth. In that moment he knew, too, that a great problem had been solved. A dizzying gladness sang through him, like potent wine.

"Wait!" he snapped suddenly. "Ermaine, if you're lying, if you're just saying that to prove your point to me—"

Sharina's hand fluttered to her throat and she turned ashen-white.

Ellory trembled in rage and suspicion. "Ermaine, if you dared—" He took a step toward her, hands working.

The Antarkan girl winced a little. "No. Believe me, Humrelly, it's true. Mal Radnor is alive. I swear it." She turned to Sharina. "You will be taken to Norak immediately. Mal Radnor needs you. Go now to your room."

Sharina moved to the door. Suddenly she turned, came back, and kissed Ellory lightly.

"It is well this way, Humrelly! You belong here. You will be happy, as First

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Lord of Lillamra. You will do much for them, and perhaps, some day, for us. We will always remember you for what you tried!"

Then Sharina was gone.

Ellory realized that in her mind all things had come to this inescapable climax. That the sojourn of Humrelly, the Lord from the Past, had ended in her world.

She had gone happy.

ELLORY and Ermaine stood in silence a moment or two now. His eyes were on her lovely face; and her half-smile seemed to reach inside of him until all he could feel was a quick surge of joy. She met his glance, expectant, waiting.

Swiftly Ellory went to her and took her in his arms. He kissed her once, lingeringly; then abruptly he pushed her from him.

"No!" He forced the word from a dry throat. "I can't betray myself, and all I believe in."

The girl stared in bewilderment.

"I choose imprisonment!" Ellory said hoarsely.

"Lifelong imprisonment? You wouldn't like it, Humrelly."

She was calm again, confident.

"Our prison is for Antarkans who have committed murder. Death is denied them, for we have no capital punishment among ourselves. They waste away, thinking of the wonderful life they have forfeited." Something of appeal crept into her voice. "Humrelly, you can't cast a free life in Antarka aside for an impossible ideal! And my love—doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"I choose imprisonment!" he said harshly.

Ermaine's first angry flush changed to a slow, thoughtful smile.

"I see, Humrelly! Men in your time pursued women, or thought they did, whereas I—" She broke off, smiling cryptically. "You will change your mind, Humrelly."

She left.

CHAPTER XXII

A KINGDOM OR A CELL

ELLORY sat for hours with his aching head in his hands. Hours of exquisite torment. He wished at this moment that he were back in the crypt, sleeping on and on into the peace of eternity. Marry Ermaine? Live out his natural life as an Antarkan? Be a passive partner to a double-edged tyranny? How could he, and ever face himself again?

Escape from Antarka! The thought grew, with the hours. It was the only solution. When a wall time-piece marking twentieth-century hours read 3:00 in the night period, Ellory stole from his room. It had never been locked or guarded, as he had previously noticed. He crept noiselessly down the deserted hall, lit only by a dim gas-jet, to the front portal. A guard sat here hunched in sleep, his flame-gun lying at his side.

Ellory picked it up without making a sound, looking it over swiftly. It had a trigger-like lever at the side, releasing the gas-pellets by a spring mechanism from the front muzzle. Grimly, he stepped away from the palace.

There was a chance of getting to the metal roof of the city. It was simple enough after that—tramping some fifty miles to the coast. Here, as Ermaine had told, lay a harbor to which the Outlanders brought their tribute of food. He could stow away on an Outland sailing ship, and eventually win back to Norak.

Filled with these plans, Ellory stepped along in the sleeping city. He thanked his lucky stars that a night period had been set aside, as in olden times, through this subterranean city knew no actual day and night.

Crossing the metal bridge to the great central elevator shaft, he confronted a dozing cage-operator with his gun. Secure Antarka evidently knew little of attacks or escapes. The man looked up blinkingly, turning pale even underneath his normal pallor at sight of the weapon pointing at his midriff.

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"To the roof!" Ellory commanded.

Nodding dumbly, but with a faint lack of concern that made Ellory wary, the man stepped to his control box. He grasped the lever and Ellory breathed easier. In a moment now they would be shooting up to the roof—and freedom.

But instead of movement, there came sound.

A bell clanged brazenly through the night hush, like a clap of thunder. Ellory saw that the operator had pressed a button in the handle, instead of turning it. Cursing, Ellory jerked over the lever himself, but nothing happened.

"No use, Humrelly!" said the operator calmly, recognizing him. "The button rings the alarm and also shuts off power in the cage. Other Outlanders have tried to escape. None has ever succeeded. You are trapped. See?"

He pointed to where running guards came up from several directions. "Give yourself up quietly," he advised.

Blind rage at his helplessness rose in Ellory.

Standing defiantly at the cage door, he fired at the first guard about the lope across the metal bridge. Unfamiliar with the weapon, he shot wildly and the ball of fire spanged against a wall to the side, harmlessly scorching stone.

A return shot came, over his head, as warning. The burst of fire above tingled on Ellory's skin and reminded him of the sickening holocaust on the Hudson.

Again gripped by his anger, he fired his gun again and again, raking the bridge end. One guard, scurrying back, screamed as a fire-ball skimmed his arm, but ran to safety.

"You are besieged, Humrelly!" observed the Antarkan in back.

Ellory's eyes fastened on a nearby metal pipe, coming from below. Within it surged gasoline, part of the city's network. Inflammable gasoline! Ellory aimed his gun at the pipe and sent blast after blast of blistering heat against it. If it melted through, gasoline would bubble out, catch fire. . .

"You'll start a terrible fire!" gasped the operator.

"And you'll turn on the elevator power, or burn with me!" Ellory declared savagely. Furthermore, in the excitement of putting out the fire, his escape would be easier.

He did not think to watch the Antarkan behind him.

Something descended on the back of his head and wheeling lights blanked out Ellory's mind. . .

ELLORY'S opening eyes looked straight into those of Ermaine. His head was bandaged and aching dully.

"You poor, stubborn fool!" Her voice was half mocking, half tender. "What drove you to that madness?"

Ellory moved his eyes and saw that he was alone with her, in a private antechamber to her sleeping quarters. He could not have been unconscious long, since the operator had knocked him out with a blow on the head. The girl wore a diaphanous sleeping gown, around which she had thrown a more concealing robe.

His failure to escape left a bitterness on Ellory's tongue that he could taste.

"You!" he said wearily.

"I?"

She looked at him for a moment, and her eyes were enigmatic.

"Come." Taking his hand, she pulled him from the couch he lay on. Ellory followed dully as she led him through a door into a small, private lift. The cage doors closed, and the lever she twisted sent them up.

Wonder struck Ellory as they stepped out again in a sealed chamber. Where were they? He started as he looked up through a crystal-clear skylight and saw stars. The chamber rested above the city's metal cap.

The goal he had striven for a while ago.

"A little surface room I had built for myself," Ermaine explained. "At times I like to sit up here and look out into the night."

Ellory's eyes adjusted to the gloom and made out comfortable furniture. He looked

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up again, with something of a thrill, at the wide bowl of sky strewn with polar stars. It was a sight no polar explorer of the twentieth century had ever seen, for none had dared brave the bitterness of the six-month night.

Ermaine stood motionless in the starlight glow.

Ellory caught his breath. She was a moon goddess again, lovely and strange. Starglow shafted from glossy hair like the patina of rare old silver. Beams of heaven-blue danced in and out of her eyes, paling even the glory of the pure blue diamond at her swan-white throat. Soft shadows led his eye along every perfect curve, every rounded grace. Hers was inconceivable beauty, in a setting conspired by the mystery of night to break the last shred of Ellory's resistance.

"Well?" he challenged. "I suppose you expect me to melt at your feet!"

She tossed her head arrogantly. "On the contrary, I expect you to behave."

"Then what are we here for?"

"To give you a last look at the stars." Her voice was low, final. "Once imprisoned, you'll never see them again."

"Kind of you," Ellory murmured. "Sharina is gone?"

Ermaine nodded.

"Our ship is probably now landing her at Norak. You'll never see her again. Or me. Tomorrow morning your imprisonment begins, for years and years—"

Ellory peered at her, perplexed. "When you last left me, your alternative offer seemed still open. You've retracted it?"

She nodded wordlessly.

In two steps he was before her, crushing her in his arms.

"Then I can say it now! God help me, I love you, Ermaine! Whatever happens, that remains!"

SHE resisted faintly, but he kissed her fiercely. Her resistance melted. She clung to him and Ellory realized now that he had loved her from the start. In all the uncertain adventure of the past months, this alone was certain.

Then, still in his arms, she whispered: "From the first moment, dearest! Up in Norak—you were like a strange god among the Outlanders. You faced my gun, dared me to kill you, and I could never forget that. I thought of you every day, wondered about you. It was no accident, at Thakal. I was searching for you, watching you do things. Almost, I didn't report you to the Outland Council at all, hoping—"

She paused.

Ellory held her at arm's length, wild joy running through him. "Hoping I'd succeed? Ermaine, it must mean—you *do* see it my way! You'll come with me, away from Antarka? Our work lies out there—"

The girl drew back, gasping.

There was a faraway, tinkling crash, as though the walls of heaven had shattered.

"Humrelly! What do you mean? I'd been hoping for you foolishly, because of my love. Then I did report you, in time to stop the rebellion, for your own sake. I knew you belonged here, with us, with me. You do belong here, beloved! We'll rule Lillamra together—"

But Ellory had stepped away from her now.

"I see," he said dully. "No, Ermaine. I'm sorry. Lordship in Antarka? Never, for me!"

The girl made no answer to the unshakable resolve in his voice. "You choose imprisonment still," she said. "And you are the sort who would never change, through years—"

Defeatedly, she turned to the elevator. Ellory hesitated.

"There is no escape from here," she said, noticing. "There is no exit through these stone walls. If you broke through the skylight, guards would capture you outside. They have been told to watch, from the nearest open-air station."

Ellory followed and the cage shot him down to what would be his lifelong prison, from that moment on. Ermaine parted from him silently.

In his room, sleep came to a troubled mind suffocated by a black future.

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THE next evening, Ellory's pacing was interrupted by the locked door of his room opening. Ermaine entered. She leaned back against the closed door, as if needing its support. Her eyes were shadowed, her lips quivering. It was the first time Ellory had seen her composure so completely shattered.

"Humrelly!" Her voice was low. "The death sentence!"

"What!"

"The Outland Council—they demand your death!" she went on. "The episode at the ball, and your wild attempt at escape convinced them you must go. They voted nine to one against me, this morning."

Ellory fought the impact of despair. After all, he had come to Antarka, a prisoner, expecting nothing less. He smiled wanly.

"Thanks, Ermaine," he murmured, "for the one vote."

She was still leaning against the door, as if against intrusion.

"There's once chance yet, Humrelly. And you must take it. Marry me now! As First Lord you'll find the Council's sentence becomes void."

She saw the slow, determined shake of his head.

"Humrelly, you must! I can't let you die—" She trembled.

Ellory's lips were white and set.

Ermaine, Lady of Lillarma, suddenly drew herself up. "I won't humiliate myself further, even in the face of death. I'll laugh when you die. I swear it! Once more I ask you, Humrelly, for your own sake—"

She turned from his stony silence.

"Follow me," she said quietly.

He followed wonderingly. She led him down the hall to the privacy of her chambers, and again in the lift to the chamber under the canopy of polar stars.

She faced him, in starlight glow.

"There *is* a door," she said in low, even tones. "Outside, there is a small ship waiting. I knew you would refuse and arranged this. The pilot can be trusted. He will take you back to Norak!"

Ellory stood stunned for a moment, realizing what she had done for him.

"But you, Ermaine—"

"I can take care of myself. My private lift, after I've descended, will slip its cable and crash below. There will be a smashed, unrecognizable body in it—that of a young Outlander who just died of disease. Humrelly, the man condemned to die, tried to escape again, I will say."

"You're letting me go!" Ellory clutched her hand. "Ermaine, it must mean you believe in the things I say. Come with me! Life in Antarka is stifled, meaningless. Come with me to the open world. Together we can do much for the Stone Age people."

Ellory saw the sparkle in her eyes, the slightly parted lips. He gave a glad cry.

"Ermaine! You will come! I can see it in your face. You know I'm right!"

The girl started. The spell was broken. Sadly she shook her head.

"Still the dreamer, Humrelly!" she murmured. "But it can't be. It's like faraway music, sweet, but gone in the wind of reality. Antarka is my life, the only life I know, or believe in. Kiss me once, beloved, then go!"

They clung to each other for a timeless moment.

Then the girl, with a little sob, stepped to the wall and moved a lever. A flush-fitting door opened outward, letting in a flurry of snow.

Their eyes met. Then Ellory turned swiftly away; he carried the picture of her tear-wet face with him as he strode to the hissing rocket craft that waited. A taciturn Antarkan inside merely nodded and motioned to a seat beside him.

The little ship glided into the polar night. Ellory looked back, till the tiny white figure and Antarka faded into gloom.

CHAPTER XXIII

HUMRELLY'S RETURN

TEN hours later the swift little rocket ship drummed down from the stratosphere in northern latitudes. It was night. Silvery moonlight gleamed from the

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waters of the broad Hudson. Ellory looked down and missed immediately the twinkling candlelights of the Norak capital.

Then he remembered—burned down!

On impulse, Ellory had the pilot skim north. They landed at the crest of the valley that held the crypt. With only a silent nod at Ellory's waved thanks, the Antarkan left again. Ellory watched the flame-clothed ship vanish to the south, and then the vast hush of the Outland world settled down like a cloak.

Already Antarka, with its hum and bustle, seemed like a dream from which he had awakened.

Ellory strode into the valley, his footfalls loud in his own ears. He entered the crypt. Tomb-like, it allowed his thoughts to run their course.

Antarka a dream? How could he ever forget it? Ermaine's lovely, tear-wet face, as he had last seen it, hung before his mind's eye. It would remain there, he knew, even if by some magic another three thousand years rolled by. He groaned a little. Destiny had decreed that they must remain apart, and Ellory found this the bitterest draught of all since his awakening, after an age.

Hours passed, while these thoughts trampled his soul, but gradually peace came. The crypt, dark and empty, curiously soothed him. The crowded events of the past days assumed a remoter perspective. He could look back now and rationalize.

He summed up the situation briefly.

His sojourn in Antarka had impressed Ellory with the power of their civilization, and the futility of any plan to break that power. They intended to be the oligarchy of Earth for ages to come, using the Outland people as servants and workmen to run their cities. So much for that.

Now, what remained for Ellory. His thoughts went back to the half-preserved laboratory he and old Sem Onger had unearthed. The glowing-wax! It was still there, hiding its secret. He began again to visualize the upspringing of science.

"You are a dreamer, Humrelly!"

He started as these words echoed in his mind. Ermaine seemed to stand before him again, half loving, half mocking him for his visionary ideas. Unconsciously he drew himself up.

"It's worth a try!" he answered her image.

He strode from the crypt at dawn, in a February world that knew no winter. He was starting all over again, as though first emerging from the crypt, with all the promise of untried things lightening his heart.

He walked through the farm-dotted valley, and exchanged his silken Antarkan clothing with a marveling farmer for old clothes and a scrawny horse.

A few hours later he strode into the presence of Jon Darm. The tall, gray-haired chief stood watching workmen who were erecting the wooden scaffold for a new Royal House. All around, among the ashes of the city-site, the Noraks were busy rebuilding their city with mortar, stone and wood. Tents and crude shacks dotting the open spaces had served as temporary living quarters since the people had returned from the hills.

Jon Darm turned and stared, as if seeing a ghost. The look of amazed joy that spread over his face brought a sting to Ellory's eyes.

"Humrelly!" he gasped. "Is it you? But I thought—Sharina said—" He raised his voice in a sudden, wild shout, forgetting his dignity as chief. "Sharina! Mal Radnor! Humrelly is back!"

A WHITE figure came flying from the largest tent nearby. Sharina stood stock-still before him, disbelieving her eyes, then threw her arms around him and kissed him.

A moment later Mal Radnor came limping up, on a wooden crutch, one leg bandaged and stiff. He gripped Ellory's hand with a silent fervor. Old Sem Onger's cracked tones sounded from the side, as he hobbled up as fast as his years would allow.

"Humrelly back? Then he can tell me why my iron plows break when they strike stone." But behind his phlegmatic words,

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Ellory caught the quiver of eager welcome.

Ellory choked.

It was good to see them all, these simple, sincere people who loved him for himself, even though their city had been burned down because of him.

Sharina looked around, and then at his Norak clothing, astonished. "You have come alone, Humrelly? Lady Ermaine—"

Ellory shook his head and explained briefly. They all listened in dumfoundment.

"You renounced Lordship in Antarka!" breathed Jon Darm. "Renounced a life and civilization closer to your own—"

Ellory interrupted, shaking his head. "Closer in outward things. But farther removed, beneath its veneer, than the moon. I will never go back to Antarka."

"You renounced your heart, too!" Sharina said in a low voice of sympathy.

Ellory heard but made no sign.

"I prefer to live among you," he continued. "If you will have me," he added, looking around at the burned city. They were all reminded of the holocaust on the Hudson.

"We do," Jon Darm said quickly. "Things past are things past. You are not to blame. Your intentions shine clear. But, Humrelly," he went on slowly, "the federation broke up completely. I think it must remain so, lest the all-powerful Antarkans scourge us more thoroughly next time, as they threatened."

His tone was slightly guarded, as though he feared Ellory had come back to lead another revolt.

Ellory nodded, his shoulders sagging. "It must remain so," he agreed. "More than any of you, I realize now the hold of Antarka. I brought you sorrow and death and pain."

Mal Radnor had gripped his arm, his young, strong face glowing.

"It was still a grand thing, Humrelly!" he said earnestly. "I will never forget that great campaign. I would follow you again—" He broke off. "No, it can't be. The Antarkans will watch closely now against federation. And it could not be achieved as easily again, barring even that. Our neighboring tribes mutter against us for bringing down on them Antarkan wrath. Already the Jendra and Quoise are preparing to war over their border."

Back to that, Ellory reflected. His flimsy empire had fallen apart like a house of cards. It had been a strange, unnatural interlude in the broad sweep of fiftieth century history, no more permanent than a gust of wind.

Ellory straightened up, brushing the past out of his thoughts.

"But I have other plans," he told them. "They may mean much more in the future, fate willing, than what I first tried. I will go again to the ruins, with your permission, Jon Darm, to experiment further." A depressing thought struck him. "Were all the crypt records destroyed in the fire?"

"No." Old Sem Onger made a horrified gesture at the mere thought. "All those are saved. I saw to that. I had them taken in a wagon to the ruins. When are we going, Humrelly?"

Ellory grasped the old scholar's shoulder gratefully.

"It may be years and years of work, old man. God knows how long, or what will come of it. But there is no one I would rather have than you."

"I have many years ahead of me," asserted the old seer, but at the same time he gave a gasp of pain. Two of his grandchildren, young boys, leaped from the surrounding crowd, supporting him as though it had become their regular duty.

"Just a twinge of the heart," Sem Onger said stoutly. "I'll be ready tomorrow morning."

"We will send whatever supplies you need regularly," promised Jon Darm.

"I'll come down to visit you," said Mal Radnor. He slapped his bandaged leg. "It'll be as good as new soon. And when it is, Sharina and I will be married!"

Ellory smiled at them. But their happiness inevitably brought him pain—the pain of remembering his own love. Perhaps down there in the ruins, striving for almost hopeless goals, he could forget.

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ELLORY found the buried laboratory in the ruins, much as he had left it. But against one wall reposed all the things of the crypt. Twentieth century things, in a laboratory of the thirtieth century. What would they combine to produce, for the scienceless fiftieth century? Ellory ached to know, in his present role of scientist. His previous roles as conquerer and champion against tyranny faded in his eager mind.

Holding the lead-wrapped lump of wax in his hand, Ellory reviewed what he had learned of it. It represented radio activity, but a marvelous new kind that released more energy with more light thrown on it. That was really the sum total of what he had found out. Then Mal Radnor had come with his news of the border war, and events had shifted. Now he was back again, as though all the intervening adventure had been a night's dream.

"What science will we do first, Humrelly?" inquired old Sem Onger impatiently.

"The science of cleaning up!" Ellory said, grinning.

He set to with a will, in the general debris, unearthing coils, metal plates, glass prisms and a variety of articles that might be useful. He set these on the large wooden table he had brought along. Among them he placed the whitened, leering skull of Dr. Unknown, who had made the glowing wax. It seemed to stare at them mockingly, belittling their efforts to solve his great secret.

In the evening, and for many evenings after they had a hot meal up above, under open sky. Sam Onger was cook, an art he boastfully acknowledged one of his best. Ellory drank in the beauty of sunset through the saw-edged ruins of vanished New York.

"You smile sadly, Humrelly," mumbled the old seer. "You dream of things that might have been, if man had not lost science?"

"Yes, I dream of things that might have been," murmured Ellory, with the vision of Ermaine before him.

He was a little startled, the next moment, to hear the powerful drone of an Antarkan rocket ship. It soared over the ruins in a wide circle three times, then headed west.

"A patrol ship," said Sem Onger. "After a revolt, they patrol the world somewhat watchfully, especially this region, the center of the last rebellion."

CHAPTER XXV

MESSAGE OF DR. UNKNOWN

IN THE following days, Ellory began to smelt down some of his metal supply, using one of the deserted clay pans and bellows left from the metal-weapon industry. He fashioned a tube. With prisms from the vault, he constructed a spectroscope. Its eyepiece was taken from binoculars among the crypt's relics. It was laughably primitive, but would serve to identify the glowing wax.

Ellory made the first test in the darkest corner of his laboratory. It was a flash-test, with the substance giving its own incandescence. Ellory had to guess at his angstrom scale in the prisms. Finally he had sketched a pattern of lines which he searched for in the physics handbook of the crypt's scientific books.

"Silicon!" he cried triumphantly, matching patterns. "A radioactive isotope of silicon! Sem Onger, step number one has been completed."

"Now you will make more of it?"

"Not so fast!" laughed Ellory. "First I have to determine some of its properties. What type of radioactivity is it? I know it's set off somehow by light-photons, but what radiation does it give off?"

In the next few days, they were busy for long, exciting hours. Ellory beat a bit of gold to extreme thinness between smooth calfskins and suspended two leaves of it from a copper wire. He held this simple electroscope before a bit of the glowing wax. The leaves did not fly apart.

"Hm—no beta rays. No electrons given off," he mused.

There was a watch among the crypt's

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relics. Ellory held its radium-dial close to the wax. There was no slightest increase of its ghostly phosphorescence.

"No alpha-rays!" he stated, astounded. "No electrons. No helium-ions. There's only one thing left—gamma radiation."

He dropped a speck of the wax in a cup of water. It continued to glow at the bottom. Ellory stuck his finger in the liquid after a moment to find it already warm. When he tried again, only a few seconds later, he yelled in scalded pain. Thirty seconds later the water boiled violently. Soon the cup was disgorging live steam like a boiler. The water was gone in a minute, completely boiled away. The speck of wax in the bottom continued to glow.

Gamma-radiation, composed of vibrations shorter than those of the X-ray, should not do that. They were too penetrative to display such tremendous effects, which showed they were stopped.

Sem Onger was mumbling to himself. "All that heat from such a little speck, and it isn't even burning wood—"

"Heat!" exclaimed Ellory. Understanding dawned. "It gives off pure infra-red radiation! This is the queerest bit of radioactivity I've ever heard of. No beta-rays, no alpha-rays, no gamma-rays—just a stupendous amount of heat radiation."

"Humrelly, this is a wonderful thing!" Old Sem Onger warmed his hands over the glowing speck. The day had been chill.

"*Is* it!" Ellory sat down to think.

Disappointment welled in him. What good was it, except to smelt down ores, of which there weren't any to speak of? A vicious circle again. But why had the unknown discoverer of this new type of radioactivity placed such stock in it? Called it a belated means of saving a metal-starved civilization? Preserved an account and sample? Why—why?

"LOOK!" Sem Onger was fumbling with the lead-foil that had enwrapped the wax lump. He thrust a sheet forward. "Look, Humrelly, there are scratchings on this sheet. Perhaps this is the record—"

Ellory snatched it eagerly. Some form of writing and various diagrams had been scratched in the soft metal.

"Bless you, old man, it is!" Ellory cried. "Here, get to work—translate what it says."

"There are many strange symbols," said the old seer dubiously.

"Never mind those. Put them down as they are. They are mathematical symbols, and those, thank the gods, have survived intact through time!"

Ellory's blood was afire with scientific zeal.

A few hours later Sem Onger read what he had translated. He spoke the words that the staring skull on the table had once formulated in its brain.

"I have withheld my discovery because it can be such a terrible weapon—a heat-ray to scorch out human life. Perhaps this record will be discovered and utilized in some future time, when these warlike pages of history are over. The radioactive silicon I've created gives off its mass as infra-red radiation. It can boil away water almost instantaneously, if it is pumped under the radiation at a uniform rate. Thereby it becomes a source of metal salts, from sea-water."

Ellory did not have to hear any more. His brain almost exploded with enlightenment. The great oceans of Earth were the most illimitable source of metals known. Untold billions of tons of every metallic salt were in that titanic reservoir, untapped by man because of the mechanical difficulties of removing surplus water.

But the glowing, radioactive wax was the answer is what!

Ellory made a little bow of deep respect toward the grinning skull.

"Dr. Unknown," he whispered earnestly, "you've contributed a great thing to posterity. I can picture the agony of your death, not knowing whether your discovery would ever again be unearthed, to serve its great purpose. But it has, and will. I swear it!"

The science of power-and-metal lay ready for the fiftieth century, given time!

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ELLORY awoke from a sort of daze two weeks later to find Mal Radnor and Sharina before him, announcing their wedding in two months, when the Royal House would be completed.

"I'll be there," promised Ellory. "And my wedding present to you two will be the first bit of metal extracted from the ocean!"

They did not know quite what he meant. He watched the happy couple go, and realized, with a stab of pain, that his heart was still in Antarka.

But despite that, his mind soared aloft.

"Tomorow," he said eagerly, "Tomorrow we test our machine."

The "machine" was a hybrid outfit. Ellory had scouted around in the ruins and found a section of tile water-pipe. Into this led a wooden trough, from a huge stone pot of water. Cut into the upper surface of the tile pipe was an aperture fitted with a simple hand-operated shutter to let light in. Under the shutter was a cradle of wires holding the entire lump of radioactive wax.

Through the night Ellory checked over the machine in his mind, recalling every detail, feverishly anticipating the work to be done on the morrow. He scarcely slept.

Would it work?

All was ready, the next day. Ellory nodded and Sem Onger twisted the bung-valve of the stone pot, allowing a steady stream of water to run down the trough and through the tile pipe. When the stream poured from the other end, Ellory snapped his shutter open.

Tensely, he watched.

Light streamed in on the silicon-wax, energizing it. Its powerful heat-radiation poured down on the water. In an instant, the trickle changed to live steam. When Ellory shouted for Sem Onger to increase the flow, steam shot out for a hundred feet with a hissing roar.

Ellory's sweated face became exultant.

Untold energy was doing this—radio-active energy akin to the semi-mystical dream of atomic power of the twentieth century. That steam could be harnessed, made to work. The metal deposits dropped by the evaporated sea-water were a vast treasure-house of metals. They could be extracted one by one, through a regulated process of boiling off the water in stages—fractional crystallization.

Here was an answer!

A great production plant sprang full-grown into Ellory's mind. One which hoarded metal salts, and rammed out immeasurable quantities of live steam. Harnessed, the steam would turn great dynamos, producing electricity. Metals and power! All that could come from this small crude machine that whistled and rattled in the pastoral quiet of dead New York.

Ellory gave a shout of triumph. It was given to few men to realize they had instituted a revolutionary thing.

"Sem Onger, this machine is going to transform your world into something beyond your dreams! It's going to build other machines and great cities and aircraft—"

"But before you can do all that," said Sem Onger sagely, "you will have to make more of the glowing wax. Do you know how to make it?"

Ellory came down to earth, nodding soberly. "Yes, but I will need radium."

Either that, or a cyclotron. Ellory had gone over the dead scientist's formulae carefully. The silicon wax could be made from ordinary silicon dioxide—sand. But only through a complicated, delicate process of radium bombardment. A cyclotron, hurling out energized sub-atomic particles, would serve as well, but he quailed before the thought of having to build one, starting at scratch. It might take a lifetime.

"Radium," Ellory repeated. "Have you ever heard of radium, Sem Onger? The world had five ounces altogether in my time. They must have refined more up to 3000 A.D. Where is it all now?"

"Radium?"

Sem Onger searched his memory.

"Yes, I have heard of it, as a legend."

"Legend!" Ellory's heart sank. No knowledge, no records of it, most likely. Had the little tubes of it, spread among hundreds of hospitals and laboratories in his time and later, simply slipped among

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the ruins, when civilization fell? Lost forever?

"Wait," muttered Sem Onger. "I have heard of its use—in Antarka."

"Antarka!"

Ellory thought of their gleaning of the world's gold and silver, booty of the ages. So too must they have gleaned radium, as much as they could find, and taken it to their land.

THIS, more than anything, was true irony. Radium he needed to launch the fiftieth century into a metal-and-power age. Radium lay in Antarka. Could he somehow go there, explain the need and ask for some?

Expect a gift from Antarka?

He laughed harshly at the incongruous thought.

First of all, he was a condemned man the instant he stepped into Antarka. Second, barring that, the Antarkans, far from releasing radium, would simply confiscate his radioactive process. It would save them the trouble of solving their metal-and-power problem of the future.

Ellory weighed possibilities. Could he somehow strike a bargain, giving them the process for part of their radium?

Too absurd, he knew, even to think about that, as well expect to rebuild his Outland empire, as hope to make such a deal.

Could one bargain with a race whose tradition for a thousand years had been to take without question? Nor would they like the thought of the rest of Earth rising in civilization, threatening their seat of authority.

Ellory saw the hopelessness of it. It was a vicious circle that offered no escape that he could see.

"The possibility left," he said aloud, "is to search in the ruins here. We might happen to locate what was once a hospital and find its radium, if the Antarkans missed it."

"That might take a liftetime!" Sem Onger grumbled. "And if you died before it was found, Humrelly?"

The impact of the words stunned Ellory.

All this lost when he died, if it were not well on its way! Not just finding radium, but applying its use. Making more of the radio-wax, extracting metals and reducing them from salts, designing steam engines, dynamos, motors, all the equipment of the twentieth-century.

Crushing thought!

A full lifetime of work stretched before him after the thing was once started—after the radium was found. Yet he might have to waste his lifetime searching, searching for radium that wasn't known to be there.

But it was known to be in Antarka, land of tyranny.

The maddening irony of it brought a shout of helpless rage from Ellory's lips.

He thought he heard an answering shout from nearby—a shout as emotion-filled as his.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

(Yes, I Did — Actually and Literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You, too, may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you, too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 79, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use, too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 79, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

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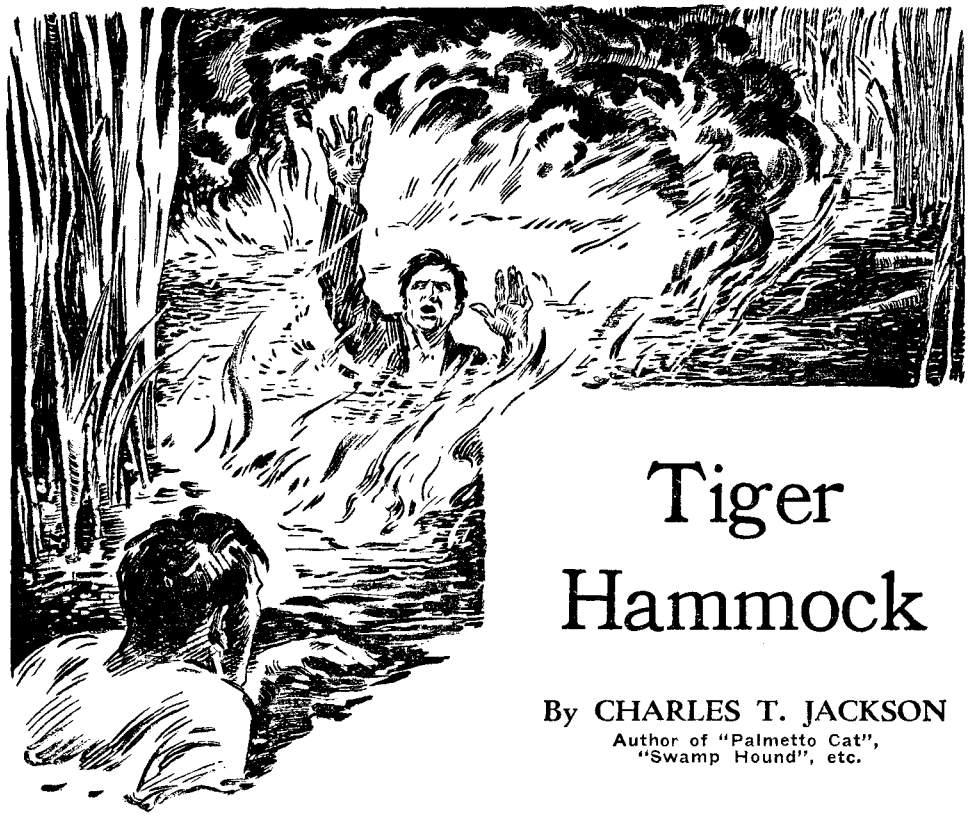

Tiger Hammock

By CHARLES T. JACKSON

Author of "Palmetto Cat", "Swamp Hound", etc.

Mase McKay of Jigger Key assists at a holocaust, and arranges for devilment at the back end of nowhere

THE arsenal mark on Old Man Captain Johnson's musket said, "Springfield, 1873"; but Mase McKay didn't feel like bringing that up when Cap had just told him how he got the gun in '65.

Everyone around Jigger Key had heard it anyhow for thirty years: how some damyankee et too many green apples at Appomattox and was groaning in a fence corner when Private Johnson, C.S.A., swiped the musket and lit out for the deep South. Kept on retreating until he hid up in the Florida Glades and never surrendered.

"Boy," said Cap, "I defied 'em. Been in these jungles ever since and the whole dang Gov'ment cain't git me out."

"Yeh," Mase answered, "I reckon they sit up nights in Washington figgerin' how to get you. How old you now, Cap? I bet you fought the Civil War sittin' in a flour sack on a rail fence, eatin' sour clabber and cornbread, watchin' them Yanks ride by. How old your mammy say you was when Gineral Lee surrendered?"

"What you mean by that?" Cap pulled his whiskers with one grimy paw and reached for his musket across the hard-packed clay in front of his fire-hole under the palmetto shack where young Mr. McKay squatted with the coffeepot. "You don't mean, by any chance—"

"Oh, no! Nothin' like that! A ol' Johnny Reb like you could be ninety-six or a hundred and ten fer all I care. I figger you are poison to Yanks right now, and that's what I come to yore camp for, Cap. Them dam' oil prospectors talk o' dredgin' a road and canal in above Royal

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Palm Park, and what kind o' trappin' and shootin' we have then?"

"Blowed up," grunted Cap. "But, by no chance, was yuh hintin' the muskit ain't what she claims to be? If so—"

"No, no. I ain't startin' no war. But I come out in the grass this mornin' to say if them county politicians like Ben Siler and Whitty join up with the oil folks fer a road, in comes a lot o' slick townies with pumpguns and cars, and they won't be game left in forty mile.

"I tried to git Johnny Cumso's Injuns to holler about it; but them Seminoles are too busy tinkering with their carburetors up along Tamiami Trail so's to git to Wildcat Corners and buy cowboy hats and postcard pictures to make any war talk against any swamp road."

"Injuns ain't what they used to be," said Cap Johnson. "Now, them Seminoles, by the record, never did surrender to the Gov'ment. Jest like me in '65. But when I made the retreat and tried to join 'em they threw me out the tribe.

"Now take Pete Tiger. I seen him yestiddy perousin' around Tiger Hammock where them bucks once had a big camp and when he saw me he ducked."

"Young Pete?" Mase asked. "Man, Pete Tiger's been guidin' for Siler and Whitty of late, and all them Injuns up by the Trail are excited about the oil-drillin'. Think they'll clean up millions."

"Sounds like they got civilized at last. Now, about the muskit—"

Mase cooled the coffee from Cap's pot to a tomato can and back again.

"The muskit?" said Mase. "You got the corkscrew out the bar'l yet?"

"It ain't the corkscrew I'm after now. I wormed down the bar'l with a fishhook on a wire but she stuck too. Mase, if ever I work past the stuff so's I can dribble more powder past, she'll go."

"Well, I don't want to be in a mile of her when she starts."

MASE eyed the muskit. Five feet, two inches Cap stood in his callouses, two more in his snakeboots; but the muskit towered away above the white hair behind his ears. It was pretty hefty too, for a man who weighed ninety-one pounds figuring in his pants.

Mase said nothing about the '73 arsenal mark. Old Man Captain swore he swiped that Yankee gun in '65. In '78 he bored her out for bear-slugs. In '98 a Cubian borried the muskit to shoot Spaniards. The Cubian brought it back with a jug of rum, no Spaniards, and the ramrod fast in the bar'l.

Cap tinkered along until 1917, when everybody was excited about war. Tried to fish the end of the rod out, burn it out, gouge and blow it out, and the durn war was over before he got ready.

Old Man Cap balanced the muskit on his knee and rubbed the bayonet lock. He looked her over fondly.

"Mase, I got her cleared enough to dribble powder past leetle by leetle. A feller over to Shark River sent to a catalogue store in Chicago and gits me some old time percussion caps. Now if I could git hold some fine powder and feed her into the cap-nipple grain by grain, mebbe that smokeless stuff'd fire the old-time powder and she'd go. If she don't pretty soon I'm goin' to file her breech open and make her into a real flintlock. Boy, she'd be a war gun like Dan Boone had. A Kaintuck gun like what they had to mow Injuns with. She'll go."

"Mebbe," Mase grunted, "yore the warrior I need to run them dam' politicians outa the glades. And them tough oil roughnecks. Old-Timer, it's sure good to meet a Johnny Reb who never did surrender."

"You wait," said Cap, and his blue eyes were grim above white whiskers. "What I plan fer the muskit is to git the junk out o' her insides, and you can talk business. Boy, you wait."

"Yeh, I'll wait. My old man said he's waited twenty-two year fer you to pay fer two pounds o' black powder fer the muskit but if she ever goes off he won't charge nothin'. Ain't no more black-powder guns. Anyhow what she needs is a

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snort o' smokeless down her insides. Man, lash her down on a scow and she'd mow ducks."

Cap had picked up one of McKay's smokeless shells and was eying the crimp. Then he said disdainfully, "Ho, ducks! The muskit's a war baby, hear me? I gits me a wood duck yestiddy with the shotgun."

"You better quit afore them wardens git you shootin' summer ducks. Them federals is mean about licenses and stamps fer ducks too."

"What's that?" grunted Cap. "You aim to tell me I can't shoot a duck unless he's got a Gov'ment stamp? How'n hell you git a stamp on him? Then suppose you shoot a duck and he's got some other man's stamp on his tail? How about that, hey? Who gits the duck?"

"I dunno. You gotta have federal stamps, that's what."

Old Man Cap laid down the muskit. He put Mase's smokeless shell in his shirt and disappeared around the thatch leanto. Mase squatted and sopped sour bread in his coffee. He'd come out here from Jigger Key with a public-spirited idea of lining up all the swamp folks possible against that new road. Maybe if Jigger Key people got them aroused the county politicians like Ben Siler would lay off it.

The McKay clan pretty well ran things in the back swamp, but the trouble was that from Jigger Key store to Shark River there weren't enough voters to man a precinct election and most of them wouldn't dare come in anyhow.

Now take Old Man Cap Johnson—and then Cap himself suddenly rounded his thatch and he had a dead duck in his hands and his whiskers were moving with visible excitement.

"Mase, I gits me an idee. Yes, sir, you talkin' about a fool duck stamp law, and I sure got a duck with somethin' wrong in his system. Lookit his tail now. That duck's been somewhere he shouldn't have been."

"What's wrong with him except he ain't legal now?"

"He gits himself all glued up somewhere. Mebbe had a lawful stamp on him and tries to soak it off his feathers. It ain't right."

Mase looked at the bedraggled duck. Its legs and tail were scummed with something that shone when he smoothed it. He smelled of his fingers and smelled the duck. Then young Mr. McKay stared at the swamp hermit and his voice shook a bit hoarsely.

"Cap, where you shoot this duck?"

"Over past Tiger's Hammock near the salt pond."

"And you saw Pete Tiger cruisin' around there yesterday? Man, I'm gettin' it all hooked up! That dang Seminole has struck millions! Oil, Cap—oil! There's an oil seep somewhere and this fool duck got it on his tail. Old Man, you and me got to git in on that right away!"

Cap took his over-ripe duck and smelled of it. "You mean there's oil in there like the big company is diggin' for up to Tamiami?"

"If that ain't oil then yore duck's a helldiver! Let's git goin'."

"You mean we could locate first ahead o' them fellers?"

"Now, Cap, you know us McKays, out in the sawgrass, don't take to them county politicians at all, and they don't like us either. That Ben Siler that used to be commissioner till they threw him out has been in to Jigger Key twice the last month, and what for? Figger it. He's heard somethin' about oil—what else? My old man owns two sections o' that west swamp, and if there's oil—us McKays can talk millions if the big company wants to do business."

"Millions?" said Cap testily. "Well, what we waitin' fer? Throw yore traps in the dugout an' I'll show you where I gits that duck. Oil on his tail, hey? Mase, this is big; you and me first on the spot."

MASE had his cypress canoe off the hammock beach and Old Man Cap was in the bow with his muskit between his knees. Mase poled out to where he could use a paddle, and then sat down.

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Once they were in the wide tidal slough straggling west, the little oak and palmetto islet was lost to view behind the sawgrass. Mase drove on in silence under the morning sun. Old Man Johnson was tinkering with his gun as usual. Once he took that 12-gauge shotgun shell that he'd swiped from Mase, eyed it and peered at the wad and sighed. He'd stuck to black powder for sentimental reasons, but smokeless had its good points. He nibbled the end of the cartridge and watched his friend.

Seven miles west of Johnson's camp was a larger hammock that had once been a Seminole settlement until, as Cap said, civilization got them. Some of the older renegades had gone deeper into the Shark River wilds, and some up along Tamiami Trail where they could reach the bus line to picture shows.

The sun was high when Mase McKay saw the gray moss-plumed oaks of Tiger's Hammock. Cap Johnson directed him into a side slough where the towering sawgrass was a barrier along a mud bank. But Mase ceased paddling before they reached the spot where the duck had been assassinated. He was intent upon a spot where the low tide had left a trickle across the mud.

Then he shoved the boat into it. There was a faint iridescent film drifting on the ooze. Mase put fingers to it and he tried to hold his voice steady.

"Cap, I ain't no expert but this is crude oil seepin' out from the grass. Man, we struck it! Now I see why Siler and Whitty been in this way, and why Pete Tiger's gone to livin' alone at his old family hangout. Them politicians got Pete here to watch things, and first thing we know they'll buy or lease every acre they can git hands on. Cap, I see more oil slick up this slough. This is biggest thing I ever got into. We'll foller around to the salt pond."

Where the slough opened into the salt pond Mase saw another oil seep from under the grass roots. The far side of the little treeless lake bordered Tiger Hammock, and Mase held away from it.

He sure was excited. He knew every pond and mud flat about, for he'd trapped them since he was big enough to know raccoon sign. Why he'd been poling mud right over millions and didn't know it! His lean brown cheeks hardened as he watched across the calm water to the scrub oaks of Tiger's Hammock. For ages and ages these poor benighted heathen had squatted about their shell heaps over millions of black gold! He wiped his brow and grew anxious.

"No breakfast smoke from that old camp, no canoe about on the shell beach. That means Pete Tiger's out in the grass scoutin' again. Hey, Cap, git the end o' that cannon down! I see Pete now. He's standin' up paddlin' so's he can see the grass. He's actin' funny, studyin' that shoreline yard by yard."

"Oil," said Cap. "Figgerin' how rich he is. Takes it damn ca'am."

"No, he don't. There he's set down and paddlin' fast. But not back to his camp. Crossed the pond into that south slough. Mebbe he saw us prowlin' round his hammock. Come on and dig after him."

They skirted the little lake and into a narrow slough, and there Cap pointed overside. Sure enough there were pole marks in two places and near each a little beady circle of iridescent oil.

"Yeah," Mase whispered. "He knows! And he knows we know mebbe! We got to stop that Injun afore he gits out the swamp and reports to Ben Siler. Cap, we got just as good right to discovery as them guys."

"War talk," said Cap. "Mase, you kin count on me in it."

Mase had shoved the dugout on past the spots where Pete Tiger had halted. A few yards up the slough, hidden by the tall grass, Mase also stopped. There was a mighty spread of oil on the mud uncovered by the ebb tide.

Too much—too dang mighty much. Mase stuttered and shoved close to this place. He eyed it and then thrust his arm down along under the sawgrass roots and felt and fished and grunted and sweated and

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muttered. Then he sat up and looked at Cap Johnson.

"I ain't no hand to complain but I feel like I been done wrong. Cap, this here simple son o' nature has been plantin' this swamp with oil. He's out to git some pale-face scalp on a sucker list but it ain't me. It sure grieves me to discover this."

Mase hauled up a wet, oil-dripping mass of old gunnysack from under the mud. He flopped the rag in the bottom of the boat and Cap Johnson's callouses took on rainbow tints. Cap looked at it.

"You mean we ain't goin' to be millionaires?"

"Took fer a couple o' saps!" Mase yelled. "But I been to town. I reads in a Miami paper how some gang is out to sell oil prospects around that test well on Tamiami, and here this Injun is puttin' one over clear down here on somebody. Can't be you and me, fer we ain't got the big dough. Cap, we got to look into this business."

CAP was looking down the muskit muzzle. The bore was sure big and black and a couple of pieces of wire hung from it attached to gadgets he'd tried to clear the bar'l with. He pulled back the rusty bat-eared hammer and let it down cautiously upon the big copper percussion cap on the vent.

Old Man Johnson had been mighty cautious for forty years whenever he could get hold of a cap that fit the muskit. If a man ever could prime her at the breech she might go. She'd been nursed along with black powder charges a-plenty but how much of it ever got past the barrel obstruction was a problem.

Then Mase grunted out of his woe and grief over that million.

"I hear a speedboat. South. Fast when she's got water, throttled down in the bad sloughs. Well now, where does Pete tie in with this? She'll come into the pond by the west slough, not here. So mebbe we can lay out on the grass point and see who wants to call in at Tiger's Hammock. Now me, I got an idea."

He slipped overside, leaving Cap in a narrow slough with the great yellow-green cane high on every side. A few yards in, the stuff thinned to a wider waterway. Mase came to the muddy bank and stopped dumbfounded.

There was a sort of raft camouflaged with brush and dried grass, something like a winter season duck blind. When he peered under he saw an oil-barrel lashed to the small logs of the raft, and there were some greasy boxes of tools and waste beyond this. The craft was moored to the sawgrass and there was no other sign of human occupancy.

Mase looked to the sky and down the winding slough. "That thing was covered so no air surveyin' party'd see it. And no boat comin' up to Tiger's Hammock could see it. But she's carryin' oil. Oil in a bar'l to salt this swamp with! Some spots to show a sucker, and sell him. Pete's the lookout fer 'em, but he's been careless with his oil. Too durn much; but here's where it came from."

He was looking at the raft when Old Man Captain came through the grass trailing his gun. Cap seemed pleased with the world. His whiskers worked and wavered and his eyes shone.

"Mase, if I ever gits smokeless down inside the breech and fire to her, she'd go like a ol' Boone gun. Don't tell me no."

"Git back to the dugout," said Mase. "I hear that motorboat comin'. My ears tickle like they always do when they pick up trouble."

"Now yer talkin'," said Cap. "Trouble —little more tinkerin' an' I'm ready fer it. What's this durn thing tied in the grass?"

"Sucker's trap," said Mase. "Bait's all laid. I bet Siler and his mob o' county promoters are backin' this. Them birds hate the name o' McKay. Say, I bet I can spring their trap on 'em. Look in it, Cap."

"Not me. Got a leetle more work on the muskit. What is it?"

"Oil. Crude oil in a bar'l. That simple Injun Pete's been strewin' it around. Lay that damn cannon down and gimme a hand, Cap. We'll launch this oil cruiser

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out to where she come. Understand, Cap?"

Mase was working at a pushpole lashed under the grass cover. He sure was sore on the world, losing all that dough this morning.

"Oil in a bar'l," Cap sighed. "Tryin' to fool somebody, hey? Durn Yankee trick. Boy, let that stuff alone. We're skinned out a million."

"Ben Siler's no Yankee. He's from Gawja, 'way back. I bet it's some Yank Ben and Whitty are aimin' to sell oil to. Gimme a hand, Cap. Throw off them lines, and we'll shove this raft out where the uptide catches it. She'll sift more oil out across the pond than them fellers want anybody to see. It'll be a warnin' to stay out our swamps."

Cap waded along the grass and tossed off the greasy moorings. He climbed aboard forward, laid his gun across the matted grass camouflage which half hid the oil drum, and looked at Mase McKay.

"Git her started. We can swing off on the point and cross to the dugout. Not that I see what in tunket yore up to."

Mase grunted as he poled the half-sunken raft about from the mud shore to the slow tide setting up all the myriad channels of the saw grass wilderness. Old Cap squatted forward and went to inspecting the rusty breech of his muskit. It sure rattled good if you shook it. Even the louder beat of a fast launch somewhere south behind the cane screens didn't distract Mr. Johnson from his forty-year problem.

Mase worked harder. He knew the speedboat would enter the lake by a deeper channel than this, more to the westward, if it was making for Tiger's Hammock; and there was no other inhabitable land to reach. He thrust the pushpole down to the thin ooze of the bottom, swung the raft, and called to Cap.

"Git to the grass. I'll foller, and one good shove'll send this cruiser out where she'll drift to the open. I hope Siler likes it."

Cap had the hammer back and was fishing down the powder vent with a piece of thin wire. He was smelling of the wire to see if it had sure wormed to the ancient powder charges he'd tried to get down the muzzle, when Maze yelled at him again. "Swing off! She'll pass the point."

Mase looked to the mangrove clump marking the mouth of the slough, and then someone rose up from its green tangle. Behind this man he saw Pete Tiger, and young Pete looked scared. Ready to dive for the grass and travel light and fast if he had to.

MASE McKAY just stared at the man on the point with the blue automatic in his hand. A heavy, red-burned man in khaki and laced swamp boots, and Mase knew him as one not to use much funny stuff on. But Mase grinned placatingly.

"Well, hello, Whitty! You must have come up right quiet."

Whitty was listening to that motorboat to the west. "Never mind how I come. Pete told me you were over here meddlin' in what don't concern you. I got your dugout in that other slough. You pull this scow in, tie it up and beat it, and I'll let you have your own. If you stay away—understand? Out of this little business."

"Say!" Mase chuckled, "that might be best. Only this raft ain't so easy to swing. She don't back up like she ought to. She—"

Whitty lunged through the brush to the water's edge. He raised the gun and waggled it two yards from Mase's nose, but he wouldn't shoot and Mase knew it.

Whitty was a tough guy working for Siler's shady speculations, and he hated the swamp McKays; but now Whitty had to handle this thing under cover. Ben Siler was coming a mile away with a certain Mr. Hanley from Cleveland. Siler wished to interest Mr. Hanley in swamp properties that sure had oil indications, before the big companies got this far south with their explorations.

No, Whitty wasn't making any noise about this. He even lowered his voice

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when he sank knee-deep in the shore mud. "You heard me, McKay. Pull back and keep that thing out of sight. I'm tellin' you, and you don't talk back. Pull ashore before I convince you with something else."

Mase shoved his pole, tilted the raft and it swung further out. Cap Johnson, forward, and the oil barrel were half-hidden by the dry grass.

Whitty watched closely; he didn't trust any McKay to do as he was told. Now he knew it—Mase McKay was leisurely handling the raft so that it would pass the mud point to the lake and then be out in the open; and it would be hard to explain.

Then the motorboat broke to louder roaring as it stirred the mud of the main slough into the lake. Mase saw it emerge from the mangroves—a smart, fast outfit, brasswork gleaming, a striped awning aft and a blue pennant straight out with her speed. He glimpsed one man with a yachtsman's cap, another with straw hat and linen suit.

The first one, sure enough, was Ben Siler, the politico-promoter of glades lands. The man at the controls was a shiftless coast guide; but it was Siler who held Mase's rapt attention. Swamp folks never wanted any piece of that guy or his works; and when Ben came in to Jigger Key to talk politics at the McKay store he always was careful to have one or two of the sheriff's deputies along.

This man Whitty used to be a deputy until some of his work got too raw, and Siler gave him a job on his land projects. Mase heard Whitty grunt as the launch flashed out across the half-mile of brackish shoal water to the little shell beach of Tiger's Hammock. Whitty muttered and waved his gun.

"You heard me. Pole that thing around behind this grass. You heard me, Mase. And keep that damn half-alligator man below the brush. Him and his cannon; I've heard all about him. Both you keep quiet, too."

"Me?" said Cap. "Mase, what's that remark about the muskit? Who's yore frien'?"

"This bird's no friend o' mine. But Cap, shut yore trap—"

Whitty plunged out from the grass point. He was waist-deep in the roily water when he laid hold of the raft end. Mase yelled.

"You dam' fool, this thing won't hold any more cargo! Get off!"

Whitty lunged farther over the lashed logs. His red face was grim.

The dry grass and brush heaped over the raft made footing hard to see, but Mase retreated to the other side past the oil barrel to counteract Whitty's heavy weight. Cap Johnson stuck his ears and white whiskers up from the other end.

"What's the matter with you two? Leetle more an' this craft'll swamp. Log-chain's slipped off this end and she'll scatter herself wide."

"Get down," croaked Whitty. "Siler mustn't see this. You got an oil streak two yards wide driftin' out this slough. Down and quiet, you!"

"Oil?" said Mase. "Dam' if you ain't right! Well, that's the racket, ain't it? Bring a sucker in here and show him oil. Hey, Ben!"

He raised his voice and Whitty went loco. Ben Siler's launch had eased up to the one-plank wharf of Tiger's Hammock and Siler and his Yankee friend were out on the beach. But they were both looking at the strange object two hundred yards away careening in the up-tide. It looked like a floating grass islet—but with three people on it cussing one another as they carefully balanced. Siler knew what it was but Mr. Hanley was full of interest.

" 'Gator hunters," grunted Siler. "Don't bother with 'em, Hanley. I'll take you back of this hammock and show you what I mean by oil seep under the grass. Where's that Injun, Pete Tiger? This is his camp."

HANLEY slapped a mosquito and gazed about. Sawgrass miles surrounding a tiny green islet under a burn-

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ing sun. But he was first on the spot if Siler's secret information was correct. And oil? Suddenly he saw a rainbow patch of water on the mirrored surface.

Siler turned up toward the deserted Indian camp under the oaks. He wanted Mr. Hanley's attention up there until Whitty could settle that racket across the pond, whatever it was. Siler recognized Mase McKay and gritted his teeth. One of those swamp McKays turn up in your business and it was likely to go sour.

Whitty knew that also out on the raft. The thing drifted slowly but it sank slowly also and separated at one end. Old Cap Johnson rose up.

"I told you fellers once this craft is spreadin' apart an' no use cussin' each other about it. She's waterlogged an' on a tilt, an' I fer one don't aim to be out in the channel with mebbe a shark cruisin' atween my legs. Somebody ought to git off."

"Yeh," said Mase, "that's right. This craft was crooked to begin with and gettin' crookeder every minute. Don't see no reason to wade salt mud to my ears to git ashore. Anyhow, I was here first. Old Man Cap was second. Whitty, you ain't no luck. You get off."

Whitty sank his head below his powerful shoulders and snarled. The boss, Siler, was watching from the beach and Mr. Hanley, the sucker, was more perplexed. Whitty glared at Mase and decided that there was no hope of keeping him quiet with threats. Mase had the lean wary grin which meant that he knew Whitty was getting in a bad spot with his boss ashore. Suddenly Mase rose higher and whooped.

"Oil! Gotta bar'l good oil to sell! Come on, suckers! Rise snakes and meet him! You ain't goin' to like it!"

Whitty didn't wait. He'd been boiling before; but now—with Hanley wondering what it was all about—he had to stop McKay's jeers. He sheathed his gun and lunged through the grass cover on the raft. What he wanted was to get to McKay, bear him down with his weight, throttle him, knock him cold.

Mase went twisting around the oil barrel to meet Whitty. He stepped to avoid the clutching hands and clipped Whitty on the jaw.

Whitty went to roaring and swung back. Mase nailed him full on the mouth and Whitty lost his head. He forgot oil promotion and orders and reached for his gun.

Mase saw it and swung his body low trying to come up too close to Whitty's arm for any shooting. But then Mase rammed one foot between the logs into open water and fell on his face.

Whitty grunted. This was what he'd been after. He sheathed his gun and deliberately fell with his hundred and ninety pounds on McKay.

Old Man Cap Johnson heard a grunt and a groan. He raised his ears up cautiously alongside the muskit. Those two fighting guys had just disappeared amidships hidden by the grass and brush. Then he saw Whitty's hairy hand clutching at the barrel lashing. The rope sagged and the oil-barrel tipped between the spreading logs. Mr. Johnson gaped.

Big Whitty had come down on top of McKay hoping to crush his ribs in and get hands to his windpipe; but he had merely shoved Mase into deep free water and plunged after him. Cap Johnson craned his neck to see more.

The raft had split wide and the middle was an oil-pool with a black barrel pouring out more. Cap scratched his head and retreated to the only secure spot behind the tool box. On shore Ben Siler was shouting hoarsely and the man in the straw hat was even more perplexed.

Then Cap saw Mase McKay's head break water three yards from the raft. Mase blew water and looked back.

Whitty had crawled up on the logs. He was smeared with crude oil from ears to waist and spitting blood from loosened teeth. He saw Old Man Johnson aft with the muskit laid out upon the box; and the sight made him too mad for reasoning.

"Jump!" he yelled. "And damned quick!"

Mase plunged back towards the raft.

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"Whitty, keep your hands off that ol' Johnny. Ninety-nine or a hundred and forty—let him alone. You're fightin' me, so come on."

Mase got a knee to the raft and looked past Whitty's legs to Cap's ears above the greasy box. He thought he saw a brown gun-muzzle—

And then it vanished. Whitty vanished also in a mighty bloom of black smoke. Above it were burning wads of ancient newspaper, and pieces of metal whined and whizzed. The roar was like an exploding comet.

Mase dived. When he came up Whitty was swimming feebly in an oily circle and Mr. Johnson's heels were kicking on the surface. Mase grabbed them.

THE raft was blazing. The surface of the water was starting to lick up in little points of smoke wherever the burning wadding and the dry grass of the raft had blown. Whitty was in the middle of the stuff and he was scared.

There was enough breeze to send the oil shoreward, and Ben Siler was yelling too.

Mase got Cap's heels and tried to upend him. Old Cap's eyes were closed and his whiskers were gone. His face was a mess of blood, but his gnarled hands still hung to a split piece of seventy-year-old gunstock.

Mase started for the grass and shoved Cap up on the mud shoal. Then turned back toward the raft hidden in a mounting plume of black smoke. If Whitty didn't get out from that circle of fire around it he was gone.

Mase got within five yards and the burning surface was between them. He dived below the fire and stroked until he collided with Whitty's kicking legs. He flung an arm about the knees and hauled back until he could turn choking, for what he hoped was free water. But it was fire when he tried to shove up. He dragged the fighting Whitty below again and ploughed mud with his face.

But a man couldn't keep below forever. Mase shoved up again and he was near the hammock beach with the fiery ripples following his movements. Whitty was half-drowned but fighting dumbly.

"Crawl, damn you," Mase gasped. "You ain't out yet. Cap Johnson fired the pond, and I don't understand it. Him and the muskit—"

Then he heard a motor. Ben Siler had jumped to his foredeck and his launchman was backing swiftly away to turn and start for the south shore. The boat swerved to skirt the burning patch by two yards and disappeared beyond the drifting smoke.

A Yank in a neat straw hat and white suit was standing on the beach of Tiger Hammock, entirely alone and staring at a burning lake. Oil, sure—plenty of oil! You could see the smoke of it ten miles across the glades.

"Hey, sucker!" Mase yelled. "Come give me a hand with this guy."

Hanley just stared at the smoking pond. The lighter oil had gone like a flash, the heavier elements turned into dull gray and yellow. But it spread with the wind and tide. Ben Siler had taken his smart little cruiser safe to windward and slowed her down. The sucker stood alone on the shore until Mase reeled along through the shoal mud dragging the half-senseless Whitty. When Mase let go of his arm Whitty crouched sick as a dog. Mase came on knocking the burning wisps from his shirt.

Old Man Johnson came to and sat up on the beach. He snorted at sight of Whitty. "I told you she'd go, Mase. If the barrel, breech and lock o' the muskit hadn't blowed out on me I'd got this feller fer keeps. Mebbe she was some overloaded."

"Yeh," said Mase. "She was. Been that way fer years. How come she went off? Cap, I wouldn't believed it if I hadn't seen it."

"Well," Cap grunted, "I primed her. All the time you was argyin' with this man, Whitty, I was pushin' some o' that fine powder I took out o' yore smokeless

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ca'tridge down the vent. I dribbled it full and give her a double percussion cap.

"Boy, she went. I ain't seen no shootin' like that since the battle of Atlanta. And she fired the oil raft that you and Whitty was fightin' about. Who's this townie, and what he want?"

Old Man Cap Johnson got up feebly and looked at Mr. Hanley. Whitty got up also but he reeled off down the shore to a point free of the smoke and opposite Siler's launch. Hanley looked at Mase McKay.

"Cap," Mase grinned, "this man is what you call a prospect—an easymark that this Siler outfit brought out here to see oil and go back and git excited. Siler and his crowd'd git Mr. Hanley in fer leasin' or buyin' everything they could git hold on to sell him. I guess he knows better now!"

"Do you mean to say?" Hanley demanded, "that I was hoaxed all along about oil prospects down here? I met these parties in Miami weeks ago and they began to hint at what they had discovered. They took me out to the Tamiami test well and then brought me in here—very secretly. Not a word to be said until we had the thing sewed up."

"Yeh," said Mase, "you was it. If Pete Tiger hadn't been kind o' careless slewin' oil around they'd had you. Man, I found it too, and an hour ago I wouldn't took a million—well, mebbe I would. I kinda wish't I'd seen you first. I didn't know suckers was so easy, honest, mister."

He grinned and the sucker suddenly laughed feverishly, and mopped his head. Whitty was calling something in a subdued voice to Ben Siler, and the boss was muttering back. Hanley turned his back on the idling speedboat and spoke to Mase McKay.

"I'm not going back to town with those fellows. I'd rather wade this swamp clear out to the Key Highway than talk to them again!"

"Well," said Mase, "I wouldn't either. They'd have yore shirt next. And you're goin' to need it this afternoon with me and Cap Johnson havin' to pole you out in the dugout till we can land you at Jigger Key. My old man'll see you git home, but we don't want to see you again back in the big grass. Hey, Cap, how about it?"

Cap shook his head.

"Ain't no place fer a dam' Yank, nohow. Say, Mase, when this smoke flicks out I bet we could dredge around in the mud an' find the bar'l o' the muskit. I'd like to see how she split."

"No we don't. Never will. The hunks o' metal off that gun whizzed past my ears so fast they ain't come down yet."

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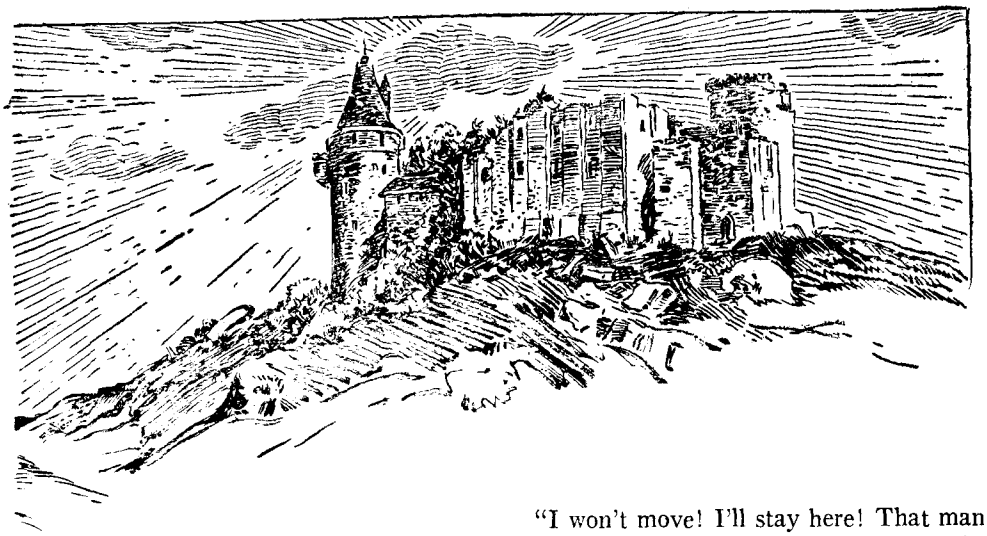

By THEODORE ROSCOE

CHAPTER XXVII

FUSILLADE AND FIRE

THEN, out in the thundering bedlam of the trench, in the confusion of red smoke, shrapnel flares and earth showers, half blinded, deafened, choking in powder fumes and fear, Shepherd missed Fielding. Heaving Gabrielle Gervais up the mud-bank, he had had a glimpse of Putinov, Arnoldo and Tac going over the top. He had struggled to aid the armless officer up the slippery wall, and the girl, kneeling on the parapet, had reached down a helping hand. Then he realized the English painter had not come out of the bomb shelter.

He dived back into the dugout, shouting.

Fielding stood at the back wall, fierce-eyed, white, defiant.

"I'm not going up there, Shepherd! I tell you, I can't go up there with those freaks!"

"You've got to get out of this hole! The explosions are coming this way!"

"I won't move! I'll stay here! That man without a nose—the one with those hooks—that horrible thing cut in half—my God!"

"They've gone into the woods! Damn you, do you want to be killed? Come on!"

"I'm not go—"

Bill Shepherd's hands, whipping to the Englishman's collar, choked the protesting yells. Fielding resisted wildly, the sanity gone from his eyes. Desperately, all his strength behind the uppercut, Bill Shepherd drove his fist into the man's jutted chin. Fielding's head snapped back; he slumped. Then he revived as Bill Shepherd wrestled him up the dugout steps.

"Are you coming?"

"Yes, yes, Shepherd. I'm with you. Bloody awful of me. Can't stand cripples. For a minute—lost my nerve—"

Bill Shepherd cried as they clambered up the boom-rocked wall of the trench, "Where's Kull? That bald-headed German—?"

"Don't know," Fielding moaned. "Didn't come out of the *château* with us. Left him there in that big empty hall!"

They were tearing through an acreage of underbrush, racing to catch the little

The first installment of this six-part serial, herein concluded, appeared in the Argosy for September 16

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group ahead—Tac, Arnoldo and Putinov running as an escort around the girl, the bobbing figure of the black-masked officer herding them from behind. The forest was flooded by a holocaustal light, a scarlet flush that streamed through the shattered trees like an unholy dawn.

A mile to the north, towering up out of the timber, stood a hundred-foot fountain of crimson flame. Rockets soared up from the vortex of this fire-fountain, arching high against the rainclouds and bursting like exploded planets. The zodiac was being shelled. Iron meteors rained down, crashing the nearby thickets. Aerial barrage was undertoned by the flash-crash of artillery shells which were bursting, now, around the *château*—the Norman tower and vine-covered upper walls plainly visible a quarter mile distant.

Shrapnel splashed like squirts of mercury in the tree-clumps under the tower, sending up funnels of white-gray smoke and savage, sharp bangs. Deep, basso booms which shook the ground underfoot were more terrifying. Most appalling in the bombardment was a terrific series of detonations traveling along the abandoned trench.

"Look!" Bill Shepherd seized Fielding by the wrist to halt him.

Blast after blast was advancing down the trench they had just deserted—explosions fifty feet apart and timed at one-minute intervals. The running torpedo bursts were blinding. Earth shot up in swirling funnels. Bill Shepherd watched a sandbag fly skyward like a beanbag taking off for the moon. The blasts were like concussions on the brain. There was a pause; then, at the bend where the dug-out was located, a stunning blast raised up a sheet of earth that opened and closed like a fan. The blasts ran on in quick zigzag, traveling toward the *château*.

SHEPHERD and Fielding ran madly to join the others in a grove of decapitated pines. Doctor Arnoldo had located a footpath where the running was easier; he was crying, "We must get under cover! We must somewhere get under cover!"

Gabrielle Gervais was leading the black-masked officer, holding him by the sleeve. She cried, "This man says if we come to a gulley we must look for a concrete pill-box. He says there is a gulley and a concrete pillbox we can hide in. Ah, *mon Dieu!*" she sobbed at Bill Shepherd as he sprinted up to her side. "Who ever heard of a pillbox of concrete, or one big enough to hide in?"

"He means a machine-gun nest. I've been along this path! The gulley can't be far!"

The voice from the black mask snapped, "It will be at the left. Up the bank. I cannot see to hurry. Don't wait for me. Go on! Go on!"

Gabrielle Gervais cried to Bill Shepherd, "We've got to help him!"

The others were racing on ahead. Bill Shepherd snatched the unknown officer's crutches; flung his arm under the man's shoulder. The girl supporting him on the other side, they ran the one-legged man along the path. Then, out of the canning-factory bedlam in the burning night behind them, came the most appalling sound Bill Shepherd had ever heard.

It began like a rising of wind, mounted to a tempest shriek, and passed overhead with the rushing whistle of an invisible express train. A split-second later in the woods a half mile ahead there was a blast like an explosion in a boiler foundry. Logs, shattered timbers soared skyward like a flock of crows.

The mask-hidden voice at Shepherd's shoulder said carelessly, "Big Bertha shell. Must've been lying in the brush near that ammunition dump. Those demolition shells come tall as a man. Flying piece of shrapnel or heat probably sent it off."

He panted a moment later, "There's a lot of dud shells lying around here. Mind you don't kick any rusty hand-grenades."

They came up with Fielding, Tac, Arnoldo and Professor Putinov in a frightened group at the mouth of the gulley. Bill Shepherd stared at a whale-sized ob-

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struction of iron and cogwheels blocking the gulley where, by the looks of a steaming bank of raw earth, there had just been a landslide. Seen in black shadow and red flame-light, the iron engine resembled a giant bug that had been gouged out of the gulley-bank. It took Bill Shepherd a second to realize the thing was a tank.

Little Marcel Tac was hysterical. "*Nom du sacré cochon!* There was that thunder smash in the distance, then this monster came out of the hill. Right out of the hill in an avalanche of earth, and rumbling down straight at us it came!"

Fielding pointed a quivering finger. "Landslide. Bank collapsed from that big shell crash. That tank had been buried right there in the hill."

They had no time to marvel at that disaster. Yesterday's terrors paled before immediate emergency. No telling where the next stray shell might land; they were racketing in the forest all around, the air was alive with whistling missiles, flying shards of metal and hailing stones. The pillbox, dimly visible in the bushes up the gulley-bank not far from the unearthed tank, did not resemble a haven. Somehow they reached this objective; clawed through a casement camouflaged with weeds and brush, and huddled into a concrete-walled den in the earth, an airless, bowl-roofed igloo of stone that confined them like a trap.

CRIMSON light streamed in through a hooded lookout which gave a glimpse of the gulley mouth where it opened out into forest a hundred yards away. Explosions reddening the night were muffled by the pillbox's concrete walls, but in the narrow confinement of this machine-gun hideout, Bill Shepherd felt as if he were crowded in a tomb.

He was jammed in between Gabrielle Gervais and the Russian; the others were huddled at his back; the den was alive with their panting, muffled oaths, scuffling. Blasts lit the gulley mouth, and they crouched in tight-strung fear, listening to fragments ricochet from the lookout casement. There was a sharp order, words that cracked with authority.

"Keep your heads down! Shrapnel might fly through the gun-ports!"

Putinov, at Shepherd's side, stirred and squirmed. His face was like a cartoon of the face he had worn an hour ago. Lips loose and doughy. Slavic cheekbones accented by the hollows beneath. Eyelids shining with tears. He was groping around Bill Shepherd's ankles; looking up, agonized.

"Help me, my friend. I have lost something. A— a chain."

Bill Shepherd rummaged in dirt and dead leaves; pulled from under a heel a silvery trinket that glimmered as he dropped it in the Russian's palm. A crucifix on a chain. A rosary.

The Russian clenched it hastily. "Thank you, my friend. I— I had it wound about my wrist." His voice went husky. "I have carried it as a remembrance, and I would not want to lose it. My mother gave it to me—" The words were lost under a thundering detonation.

A hand crept into Bill Shepherd's. The fingers tightened in his. Gabrielle Gervais' eyes were dark, meeting his turned glance.

"Are you afraid to die, *mon ami?*"

He tried to grin an answer. "Sure. Everybody's afraid to die. But nobody's going to." He gripped her hand reassuringly. "At least, not in here."

He thought she whispered, "I do not mind dying if I can hold your hand." She was blinking back tears. Her voice came through a distant shell crash, —"better than a man who can eat a horse."

He told her, squeezing her fingers, "I like that. Good girl. Stick to your guns. Be consistent."

Certainly she was, of all this night's madness, the only consistent character. That she could remember her confession-story romance throughout this maniacal nightmare! All hell was loose. In a woods of dead trees surrounded by cemeteries, the soldiers of the World War came back and brought a World War bombardment with them. Phantoms came and went in

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the night with the seeming reality of ghosts in Shakespeare's plays; an armless, one-legged officer in a black mask snapped orders to direct their actions. But this French girl who resembled Edith Cavell told a story and stuck to it.

"Beel! What is that?"

He had noticed it, too. Been half aware of it as something he might have imagined with his swirling thoughts. Somewhere out there in the forest beyond the gulley mouth a cat was squalling. The caterwaul had been going on for some time. Now the others in the pillbox were listening to the constant yowl.

Fielding asked hoarsely, "What the devil is making that sound?"

It was the voice from the black mask that answered. "There is a wounded man out there."

HORROR-STRUCK, they listened to the wail. Waited for the echoes of a shell burst to pass. Listened; heard it again.

Doctor Arnoldo said throatily, "It is someone in agony. I thought I heard a cry in German."

Bill Shepherd blurted, "Maybe it's Kull!"

The caterwaul reeled up to eerie soprano, died to a moan.

"Bloody!" Fielding gasped. "Sounds as if he's there in that thicket above the mouth of the gulley."

Marcel Tac was sobbing brokenly. "I cannot stand that. I cannot stand that wailing. I tell you, it is driving me mad!"

Bill Shepherd unlaced his fingers from the girl's. He said through his teeth, "I'm going out there." He called, "Doctor Arnoldo! Are you coming with me?"

Gabrielle Gervais gasped, "Regard! Beel! Look at that!"

No one had noticed the black-masked officer's departure. Through the narrow slit of the pillbox lookout, he had come into view, flickering down the gulley on his crutches, running at a one-legged skip toward the underbrush which gave issue to the caterwauls.

Then, up the bank not far from the crutching figure, there burst a ball of dazzling fire. The crippled officer stumbled forward and fell in an awkward heap.

Bill Shepherd spun about from the casement. "Come on, Arnoldo! That man was struck! We've got to reach him and the other!"

The Italian, squatting on his heels, made no move. Catching him by the lapels, Bill Shepherd jerked him to his feet. "You're a doctor, aren't you? You can't let men die out there! What the hell is the matter with you?" He flung the man at the pillbox hatchway.

Fielding moved forward. "I'm with you, Shepherd. You'll see I'm not yellow."

"Let's go!"

Out of the pillbox, they chased along the gulley in a wild dash to reach the fallen cripple. Behind Bill Shepherd there was a savage *whang!* Doctor Arnoldo dropped; floundered on his knees beside the path, screaming, "I've been hit! I've been hit!" His teeth were bared in agony; eyeballs glowing with fright.

Racing to the Italian's aid, Bill Shepherd found the man bent double, convulsed by a bleeding gash in the calf of his leg.

"*Madre Maria!* I will lose my leg! I am dying! I bleed to death! I have been struck by a shell!"

Stooping, Bill Shepherd snatched a rusty, weed-snarled army automatic out of the burdocks beside the path. "It's only a bullet scratch! You kicked this loaded pistol, you fool! Get up!" He hauled the whimpering Italian to a stand. "That officer's badly wounded. Get him back into the pillbox if you can."

But the others had come out of the pillbox to the Italian's aid; even the hysterical little bus-driver was running about. Bill Shepherd realized that the thunder of shellfire and the aerial bombardment had, as though at a signal, come to a stop. Red sky reflected a great fire, but there were no more explosions. In this silence, the caterwauling in the forest beyond the gulley echoed like the yowling of a banshee.

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THERE in the bushes at gulley's end they found Siegfried Kull. The bald-headed German was snagged in a great net of barbed wire; held helpless like a large insect in a steel spider-web. His coat and britches were torn to rags; he was scratched and bloody from his struggles to extricate himself; and he hung sobbing and groaning in the tangle of strands, half mad with terror, his bald head wreathed in a crown of thorny barbs, his features like those of a man crucified.

"Save me! Save me!" he was screaming.

But, aside from the scratches on his legs, arms and hands, Herr Kull was unharmed.

His screams broke down into tears. Fielding had told him about the ammunition dump. *"Ach, Lieber Gott! Lieber Gott!* I thought war had been declared. I thought it was the war!"

Bill Shepherd, remarking the ashen face, thought, "That's no Nazi Terrorist—that's a frightened old man."

Weeping and groaning, Herr Kull was trying to explain how he had run into the forest to escape the bombarded *château;* the terrible experience of being caught and held helpless in an entanglement of barbed wire.

But everyone was more concerned with his own tortured nerves. With the wonderful quiet that had come over the forest after that fusillade of explosions. With the marvelous realization of personal escape from death. With bewilderment over the black-masked officer who was lying in a crumple, his armless sleeves askew; leg buckled under him—an alien and unknown stranger in their midst. And with the tower of the Château de Feu which was on fire and, reared against the fevered sky, was burning like a torch.

CHAPTER XXVIII

DAWN IS SANITY

GABRIELLE GERVAIS was trying to turn the wounded man on his back. "He is conscious, Beel! The blood comes from his chest. Ah, *Dieu!* we must stop the bleeding!"

Bill Shepherd shouted harshly at Doctor Arnoldo who was moaning and muttering, occupied in binding a handkerchief around his own leg. "Leave off fussing with that scratch of yours, can't you? This man will bleed to death."

The Italian doctor hitched forward with an exaggerated limp. His features writhed at each step. He snarled, "I have not got my surgical case. Without antiseptics I can do nothing. First it is my fingers in a door; now a wound in the leg. A bullet from a rusty gun such as that is almost sure to give one tetanus."

He winced, going to one knee beside the crumpled officer. *"Porca!* A miracle if I do not return to Italy in an ambulance, suffering from gangrene. And who is this masked one who masquerades in officer's uniform—a bandit?"

Fielding said, "That's right!" voice indignant. "Who the devil is he?"

There was a crowding forward as Bill Shepherd and the girl turned the wounded man over. Gently, Gabrielle Gervais was fumbling to unbutton the faded khaki tunic. Bill Shepherd, straightening the helpless leg, discovered that it was hinged at the knee and encased in a steel brace, like that worn by paralytics, concealed under the pant.

He felt a twinge of pity. Whoever this fellow was—in the madness of the past thirty minutes, there'd been no time to ask questions—he'd undergone at some time in the past a barbarous butchery. Both arms and right leg amputated. Left leg in a brace. The man's uniform cap had fallen aside, and Bill Shepherd didn't wonder that the tousled hair which lay damply across the forehead of the black cloth mask was snowy white.

Gabrielle Gervais said tremulously, "Is it bad, Doctor Arnoldo?" opening the tunic to expose a bleeding gash under the heaving ribs. The wounded man was breathing heavily. Gusty breaths which billowed the mask that covered his face

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like an execution cloth and was tied by strings knotted tightly at the back of his head.

The Italian doctor grunted. "How can I tell? Has anyone a bandage? Before I work on this brigand, I would remove his face-cloth."

A groan escaped the prostrate figure. "No!"

Bill Shepherd, a hand behind the white-thatched head, hesitated.

Fielding cried, glaring down, "Go on! Go on! What are you waiting for, Shepherd?"

The masked head lifted itself from Bill Shepherd's supporting hands. The armless shoulders reared up as though in convulsion. Then the wounded man fell back panting. "Do not remove the mask! I appeal to you as gentlemen! There is a girl here—do not remove my mask!"

At the panic, the utter misery in that petitioning cry, Bill Shepherd felt the hairs rise on his scalp. It was as if the wounded soldier, supernatural, feared exposure and extinction if his face were looked upon by human eyes.

AND the eyes that arrived on the fringe of that scene just then were not human. Madame Landru's eyes. White-rimmed. Glowing like witch-shine in her gray-frowzed head. And the hobby-horse eyes of Archambaud peering wildly over the old woman's shoulder.

They created an interruption, charging out of the red-shadowed gulley, both galloping. In her arms Madame Landru was carrying her dog. The dog was dead.

Bill Shepherd bucked to his feet. "The *château!*"

"On fire!" Madame Landru moaned. "It is the Battle of the Somme that is still going on. Théophile has been killed."

Archambaud whinneyed, "The ghosts are in the halls. I saw them! My wife saw them! Run for your lives!"

Madame Landru, hugging her pet, came to a shrieking stop. "There is another, Landru! Look! The one without a face! Ah, la, la! The woods are full of them! Soldiers without arms! Soldiers without legs! Racing into the *château!* Up into the burning tower! The maimed ones! The corpses! The dog howled in death, and when we ran upstairs to find Théophile we saw the dead soldiers chasing a corpse with a whistle in its throat up into the tower." The old woman jigged in terror. "We saw the un-dead dead! The Forgotten of God!"

The growth on her throat strangled her. Empurpled, choking, she fell to the ground.

The voice behind the black mask was speaking. Harshly into the vacuum of silence left by the woman's outcry.

"Take me there! To the *château!* At once! Fritz has run up there—he is crazy with shell-shock—they have gone into the tower to save Fritz. I must call them back!"

Bill Shepherd gazed across the tops of red trees. A pall of luminous smoke hung over the *château.*

"We are only wounded veterans," the voice behind the mask spoke thickly. "Only poor *mutilés* left over by the World War. They called us heroes, then they imprisoned us in hospitals where we could not remind the good citizens of a time they did not want to remember.

"We—we are left-overs from the Battle of the Somme. We have meant no harm. We did not like the hospitals, and we walked out. Summers we have spent here in this forest, where no one comes. Winters we hide among the streets of Paris, and beg. They are only wounded veterans, those that you fear. Help me get them out of the fire. Help me save them—"

The voice broke off with a gasp.

Bill Shepherd, staring over the red-topped trees, was unable to look down. He tried to speak; could only shake his head. The tower was gone.

IT HAD fallen like a toppled chimney to make a great hill of scorched brick and broken masonry at that end of the wing. Only a lower bastion remained. Strange that tonight an unaimed shell

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from an exploding ammunition dump should fell an objective that the trained cannoneers of three armies had failed to demolish in months of firing. Queer, too, that the rest of that ruined manse should have suffered no demolition.

In the first gray creep of morning, the *château* in its shroud of vines—save for the toppled tower—stood silhouetted in dismal disrepair. Perhaps the ghostly artillerymen who had directed that aimless bombardment had scorned the already gutted ruins.

Ghostly artillerymen? Bill Shepherd was not sure, now, that there were not such things. In this forest cemetery surrounded by legions of white crosses the supernatural had happened. At least, viewed from the normalcy of life, they were not according to nature. That thirty minutes of bombardment, for example—thirty minutes by a clock, perhaps, but a terror that had lasted a whole lifetime.

Such things as that, and such things as Marcel Tac, as seen in this desolation of morning, moping about in the rags of his bus-driver's uniform like a plucked bantam beaten in the cockpit. Muttering over and over, "I was a coward. *Ah, Sacré Dieu!* Under fire I was a coward!"

And Professor Putinov, hobbling about on his sprained ankle, a man gone deaf and dumb, able only to stare and swallow and burst into dramatic Russian tears every time he looked at a silver rosary clutched in his hairy hand.

And Herr Kull, sitting on a bench in the decay and wreckage of the formal garden, his bald head bowed, his eyes on the vine-tangled fountain nymph in a fixed, unseeing stare. He had said once to Bill Shepherd on their approach to the *château,* "Do you think that horrible thing could have happened to—" then choked back the words, as if unable to bear the thought.

Such things as that, and such things as Fielding coming up from behind, spinning Shepherd about with a grab, then declaring in a sickly way, "Look here, old man. I know I seemed beastly about those—those veterans. I wish to God you'd try to understand."

Understand?

And there was Doctor Arnoldo, sleeves rolled to the elbow, working over that unknown officer whom they had carried into the one livable corner of the *château.* Doctor Arnoldo, self-assured once more, now that he had found his medical kit, cauterized that scratch on his calf and washed his hands in antiseptic. Altogether the surgeon, the best in Italy, professional, deft, dapper, fighting to keep an interesting specimen from hemorrhaging.

And Gabrielle Gervais, running to replenish the hot water, wringing out towels, quick and self-disciplined and gentle of eye and hand, like any good nurse—like Florence Nightingale herself, or Edith Cavell.

Such things as Gabrielle Gervais bringing sanity to the disordered brain of Madame Landru by commanding her to boil bed-sheets for bandages and be damned quick about it— "And wash that dead hound off your hands, you *bourrique!*" And getting fast action out of Archambaud, with, *"Sacré,* will you fetch the brandy, or shall I? Hurry quickly, lump of dirt! Lascar!"

And to Bill Shepherd, "Bee!! Get yourself a drink of cognac and be off! We are going to operate! You are in the way! Go and assist the firemen! Be out of here!"

YES, firemen had arrived—a comic opera company in brass hats, all sitting at attention in a little red hose-cart that had somehow come from Contalmaison. With them was the mythical Lieutenant Jaloux of the mythical Contalmaison *Gendarmerie.* Like extras at a carnival they blurred into the background and set to work digging in the tower ruins, bright birds scavenging for bodies.

On the heels of these clowns, a long-hooded, mud-spattered blue Rolls Royce skidded into the *château* driveway. Doors banged open, and there was the woman in black—the mysterious lady of the lawyer's office (how many years ago was

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that?)—and the lawyer, himself, dusty, vellum-faced Monsieur Bertrand.

"Monsieur Shepherd! Monsieur Shepherd! What in the name of God has happened here? I called your hotel and could not find you. They said you had not come in for the night. I thought you had come to this dangerous place. *Oui,* so I drove to Contalmaison last night with Madame Mallarmier, hoping to find you at the inn. We heard the explosions, and—"

"Mother!" Gabrielle Gervais, towel about her head, came flying out of the *château.* "Name of God, mother! Why did you come?"

Gabrielle Gervais and the woman in black locked in each other's arms. The woman in black throwing back her veil, looking more like the French girl's twin sister than her mother, shaking Gabrielle by the shoulders.

"What is that which is this, Gabrielle? Your dress! Your hair! *Mon Dieu,* but Phillipe will never forgive you—running away from the wedding, leaving that mad letter that you were coming here to hide in this awful forest. Your father is on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Is it every day he could arrange a wealthy match? He phoned to me in Paris; I was just preparing to drive to Amiens.

"When I heard where you had gone! *Voilà!* I had seen an advertisement in the paper about this forest. I drove at once to the office of the good *avocat* handling the estate—this kind Monsieur Bertrand—told him he must arrange at once for me to visit the property; that he must delay all other visitors until I had found you—and that—"

Gabrielle Gervais cried, "Please, *maman!* I cannot talk of this now. Poor veterans have been killed. A man is dying." Disengaging herself from her mother's arm, she turned to Bill Shepherd who was standing beside Monsieur Bertrand, astounded.

"Beel! Beel! He is dying. The poor officer in there. He asks to talk with you."

Ghostly artillerymen? Why not, when things like that could happen in the Forêt de Feu? If the first pale banners of sunup had not frightened them all away, they should, Bill Shepherd thought, be there in the entry of that chamber where the masked officer was dying. Playing a ghostly taps.

CHAPTER XXIX

HEAR THE LITTLE PEOPLE

"CAN you hear me?" the voice behind the mask was very low. Bill Shepherd leaned over the shabby couch.

"Yes, I can hear you."

"I wanted to speak with you. You know I'm—washed up."

Bill Shepherd glanced at Doctor Arnoldo. Briskly professional, the Italian, now entirely recovered in demeanor, was closing his surgical kit. He caught Bill Shepherd's glance, and shook his head. "The man," he said aloud, heartlessly, "will not live."

The prostrate figure on the couch stirred slightly, chuckled. "Been living on velvet too long anyway. Damned public nuisance—big expense to the State. Interesting medical specimen to these sawbones; aside from that, no earthly use."

Bill Shepherd waited until the dapper physician was out of the room. He said huskily, "You—you'll pull through all right."

"Not a chance, fella. On my way West. It's about time, and not much left of me to go. That chunk of shrapnel broke about the last solid bone I had left. Besides, I want to stick with my squad. Good fellows. Known 'em for years in the hush hospital.

"We were all picked up after the same bombardment and carted off in the black wagon, slated to be croppies. Instead, we all lived. We've—we've stuck together for years."

After a period of heavy breathing the dying man resumed, "They elected me captain. We had a sort of club. There's a big batch of us in the hush hospitals in France. *Les Gueules Cassées.*

"Ever hear of us? The Society of the

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Broken Faces. I don't suppose you have —we aren't as popular as the Elks. They don't like us in parades. Not in hotel dining rooms or charity bazaars. Embarrassing at Cannes or Nice or the race track, too." The faint voice was bitterly ironic. "They chase us off the streets these days. They say we slow up the recruiting."

Bill Shepherd waited as the dying man coughed.

"Are you still there, Shepherd?"

"I'm here."

"That's your name, isn't it? Shepherd?"

"Yes."

"The little French girl told me you owned this *château* and the woods."

"I—I did."

"Say, Shepherd, take my hand, will you? No, damn it, I haven't got any hand. Can't see very well. The little vision I had is gone. That's all right, I don't need to see to know you're a right guy. Listen, Shepherd, I'm sorry as hell—all the trouble I've put you to. I know the rest of the boys were sorry, too.

"If Gustav hadn't gone off the handle, there'd have been no trouble. He never got over being in the execution squad that shot Edith Cavell. Fine chap when he was in his right mind. Thunderstorms sent him off. I—I'm certain the poor devil fired that ammunition dump. Must've found a detonator hidden in the woods somewhere. We've been around these woods a lot, you know. Camped out here in the summers. Good place for us. We never troubled anybody."

Bill Shepherd said chokily, "I'm sure you didn't."

"For a fact. We found some old tents. Nights we'd sit around a fire and talk the Battle of the Somme. Knew every inch of this sector, myself. Sometimes we'd pick up a little money gathering scrap iron. Didn't think anyone would care.

"French Government used to pay as high as a dollar for unexploded shells. So much a barrow for shell fragments. We'd load the stuff in a cart and the *chasseur* would put on his rags and sell it over in Thiepval. The peasants were sneaking in on the business, too. I figured if anybody was, we were entitled to it."

"Sure," Bill Shepherd whispered. "Sure you were."

"THE boys were all upset tonight about Gustav going off the handle. And they knew they wouldn't be coming to the forest many times more. I know they followed him into the burning tower deliberately."

"Why wouldn't they be coming to the forest?" Bill Shepherd whispered.

"The Uhlan read in the paper it was up for sale. Government was going to take it over for taxes if unsold. That's why we came out here tonight. Have a last fling. Camping on the old camp ground. The boys were all broken up about the sale. Didn't want to go back into confinement. Back among the basket cases. I guess we're all a little crazy. Of course, I don't think I am. When you are, you never think you are, eh?" The dying man chuckled a second time.

"Anyway, Shepherd, we'd left some clothes—old rags of uniform and stuff—around in the dugouts we'd lived in. I'd left a kitbag full of souvenirs and stuff up in that *château* tower. Figured we'd better get our things before the sheriff came in. And there've been some peasants killed in these woods—"

The faint voice choked off, coughing. Then:

"Are you listening, Shepherd? Peasants killed. We didn't want to be blamed for it. But we didn't have anything to do with it. That poacher—his dog stepped on the trigger of a rifle lying in the brush. Lots of old guns and junk around out there. The poor little girl kicked an unexploded hand grenade."

"I thought as much," Bill Shepherd said. "It was the blacksmith's daughter that bothered me."

"Poor Paulette?" Another faint chuckle. "Must've shot herself. Picked up a pistol somewhere—had it with her, maybe, when she went riding. Wanted the mayor's son nailed for murder. Anyway, she shot her-

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self and threw the gun. The Cossack found a pistol lodged high in the crack of splintered pine not far from the place it happened. Anyway, it wasn't us. Hope we didn't scare you all half to death."

The dying man paused to draw a breath. Shadows were ebbing into the corners of the room; staircase, fireplace and grandfather clock were coming into view. The voice behind the mask was fading.

"Shepherd."

"Right here." He stooped low.

A gesture from the dying man's shoulder. "My cap. Is it on?"

"On the chair beside you. Want it on?" Then, as the black-masked head nodded and Bill Shepherd picked up the cap, he saw something he hadn't noticed before. Over the visor. A maple leaf.

"Captain!"

"Yes, fella."

"Were you with the—the Canadians?"

"Right you are. Went into action in these very woods. Stationed, matter of fact, here in this bloody *château*."

Bill Shepherd said in a tight voice, "Did you—did you happen to know a Captain Shepherd?"

"HUGH SHEPHERD?" the figure on the couch stirred. "Sure, I did. Knew him well. I knew you must be the kid brother he thought so much of. Used to speak of you often out here. I remember. Kid brother named Bill who aspired to write novels. So you're Hugh Shepherd's brother—"

Bill Shepherd whispered, "I often thought of Hugh."

"He often thought of you, fella. Remember him once telling me he wished you'd write a novel some time and take the whole stinking lid off War. He was a good officer, your brother, but he hated the show like hell. Wished he could write against it himself. Write something that the underhanded diplomats and dirty propagandists and fat armament makers and hypocritical priests and ministers who send men out to butcher each other with their cheers and pious blessings—write something that would expose the whole lot."

"Hugh—Hugh said that?"

"Hell!" The fading voice roused. "That wasn't half. He—he wouldn't even go home on furlough. Didn't want any part of the human society that could go off on such a murderous debauch. He felt that the people back home were as much to blame as anybody. Not the little people. The big people. The big people who stuffed the little people with a lot of poisoned propaganda and patriotic candy and sent them out to tear at each other's throats.

"He used to say if they could kill the big men at the top it would be just and fair. Kill what he called the upper scum. It's the bottom men who fight all the wars, he used to say—the little clerks and farmers and thirty-dollar-a-week factory hands who don't know what it's all about. What was the good of killing a lot of little German sausage makers, pastry cooks and carpenters when you didn't get the big boys at the top—the Prussian Junkers who had misled them.

"Did you ever get a shot at Bertha Krupp? At Fritz Thyssen, the millionaire armament king? At Eulenberg? At Von Bethman-Hollweg? At the men behind the German Government? At William the Second?

"You fired a rifle, and who did you kill? Some picayune nonentity who had no more voice in the show than Hindenburg's stable-boy. You fired a thirty-thousand-dollar battery of shrapnel, and you killed three pretzel bakers, a high school student and a chimney-sweep. You never got the men responsible.

"He used to say you could look all day through the sights of a rifle and you wouldn't see any kings, generals, prime ministers, bank presidents, steel-mill owners, bishops or Princes of the Church in the trenches.

"Personally," the dying man murmured, "I couldn't blame him. He was only nineteen when he came out here, and he went into a battle that cost the British sixty thousand casualties the first day."

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Bill Shepherd waited dumbly through a pause filled with the sound of the dying man's labored breathing. Who was this officer who had known his brother's innermost thoughts?

The masked head moved on the pillow. The fading voice roused again. "He used to talk with me a lot, your brother. He compared the War to a forest fire. It had started. You had to try to put it out. You had to blast a trench across Europe to stop it. You had to kill a lot of little men who hadn't started it. He thought the big men of all countries were responsible. The bankers. The clumsy diplomats. The men who owned and ruled. They threw the matches. They lit the tinder.

"Maybe they didn't mean to do it—maybe in some quarters it was deliberate—but the fire was burning and you had to put it out. Perhaps after it was over the incendiaries would have learned a lesson. Maybe all the little people had not died for nothing.

"Your brother thought nationalism was directly to blame. The selfishness of nations all trying to keep the best place in the sun. He hoped for a possible Democracy in which all nations joined together, formed a world nation—like the colonies joined together to form the United States.

"He used to talk about that. He said if that happened, this terrible human sacrifice might have some worthwhile meaning after all. As long as the German militarists were in the saddle they had to be beaten at any price, but Hugh Shepherd didn't forget that other nations were partly responsible.

"He said that if he ever lived, he'd never go back and play golf in a world like that. He said his own father had made money selling bum steel to Russia in 1914; if he ever lived he wouldn't touch a penny of that kind of cash. He said there'd be only one thing worth living afterward for—a world Democracy, a new feeling among men, a new type of Christianity that practiced what it preached, honor among diplomats and unselfish, chivalrous, trustworthy, intelligent leadership. Ha—!"

BEHIND the mask there was a harsh, savage laugh. "Can you imagine what Hugh Shepherd would think of today? Hitler! Mussolini! Stalin! Madrid and China and the fate of Czechoslovakia and and the hate-campaign against the Jews! Oh, my God!" A terrible mirth shook the figure on the couch. The dying man was strangling. Convulsed.

Bill Shepherd cried out, unable to bear that agony of sound.

"Gabrielle! Doctor!"

"No!" the masked man cut him off, rearing his head. After a moment of panting, "I'm all right. I—I was just thinking what your brother would have thought, what all those soldiers out there in those War cemeteries would have thought—if they were alive today. I—I guess a lot of us felt as Hugh Shepherd did after the Battle of the Somme."

Bill Shepherd waited for the man's painful gasping to ease. Dimly he saw Gabrielle Gervais at the doorway; signaled her to go back.

Then, stooping over the couch, he whispered, "Captain?"

"Yes, fella."

"You know this forest; you knew the Norman tower! Are—are you my brother?"

The armless shoulders twisted in denial. "I only knew Captain Shepherd."

Bill Shepherd said huskily, "Would you—would you take off the mask?"

There was a long pause. "If you insist—"

But Bill Shepherd's fingers were already busy at the strings.

He lifted the black cloth expectantly; stood wordless, cold.

There were features beneath that crown of snow-white hair. Features, but no face. One ear and eye were gone—the left eye no more than a sliver of egg-shell gleaming from a slit above a dreadful, outpuffed cheek. The nose was broken, twisted, shapeless. The jaws, battered sideways, were a counterfeit of grafted bone and skin, blue-yellow in discoloration. The lips looked as if they had been sewed on

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with undertaker's thread, made of sausage peel and sewed down at one corner in a mocking, hideous grin.

Bill Shepherd could not repress a shuddery gasp. Shock-numbed, his fingers let the mask fall back into place.

The dying officer's voice was a faint, whispery snarl. "You can see I am not Hugh Shepherd. Hugh Shepherd was young, strong in body and heart, with honest and open features, and a certain integrity of mind. He was decent and democratic and forward-looking, anxious to amount to something and eager to do something with his life. He was proud of his intellect and proud of his physique. He was full of faith in the future, and hope and self-confidence. Hugh Shepherd was killed in the tower of this *château* during the Battle of the Somme, and I saw him die. Hugh Shepherd is dead."

The figure on the couch went silent. Presently, waiting wordless, Bill Shepherd thought he heard a sigh. He placed his hand on the forehead under the thatch of snow-white hair. The masked Canadian officer was dead, too.

CHAPTER XXX

FAREWELL TO THE FORET DE FEU

HE STOOD at a window with Gabrielle Gervais and looked out at a landscape hauntingly gray in the light of a morning that, after a brief appearance of the sun, had clouded over to rain. The day might have been mourning a prospect of neglect and ruin, shedding steady tears. In the Forêt de Feu the shattered pines stood up out of the second growth, black and ugly like the masts of sunken ships jutting from shoals of dark green surf. The gray paste wagon-road sloughed off between the tangled thickets and climbed an eastward slope jungled with weeds and briar and pitted with craters that still held segments of night.

At the slope-top where the road was banked on either side, Bill Shepherd could see the tilted barrel of the field gun which blocked the approach to the bridge—the cannon which had been exhumed by a bankslide, or dragged there by some furtive salvage-hunter.

Westward, where the road disappeared in the timber, he could discern the winding gulley where the pillbox had been. About a mile distant, in a forested hollow, a sluggish yellow steam cloud smoked up over the trees and was beaten down by the rain, as if a vast rubbish pile was smouldering there. It was a forlorn scene, and the sky over France and Belgium, and eastward toward Germany, wept. Only a patch of poppies thrown across a slope near the *château's* drive, like a quilt discarded on an ash-heap, made a bright smear of orange in the gray.

"Beel?"

"Yes."

"Mother and Monsieur Bertrand are waiting for us. Mother will become impatient."

"In a minute."

He wanted to remember this scene. He never wanted to see it again, but he would keep a mental photograph of it. Of this mouldy room with its great black fireplace and decaying stair, its shadowy corners and cobwebby, mummy-case clock. Of the wing of ruins beyond—the great, gloomy hall—the wreckage-strewn corridors and salons—the gutted mansards and demolished tower.

He wanted to remember the forest with its little German graveyard and weedy by-paths and dark thickets camouflaging crumbled trenches and rusted war machinery—these stale woods undermined with tunnels and ammunition depots and secret hideaways—a dangerous No Man's Land in a front of sleeping cemeteries.

He looked around at the room. He did not want to forget a detail of the setting or the people who had been there. Fielding and Herr Kull. Putinov and the little Marcel Tac and the doctor from Italy. He had shaken hands with them and said goodbye. What plain, unvarnished mediocrities they had seemed at daylight, taking their departure in the taxicab summoned from town—a physician, a busi-

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ness man, a bus driver, a college professor, an artist.

At a time of danger and emotional stress they had been no more undignified, panicky, demoralized and unheroic than he himself. He hoped he would never see any of them again.

But now they were gone they seemed as incredible as any other aspect of last night—identities as alien and strange as that squad of *mutilées* and their faceless captain from the hush-hospitals. It occurred to Bill Shepherd that the War had not only mutilated the soldiers at the front; it had mutilated the civilians who had stayed at home, and the younger generations that had followed—mutilated their minds.

Not the least incredible of last night's madness had been that brawl of hostile ideologies—Communism against Fascism—the next War argued violently in the midst of a dismal ruin still haunted by the last.

"Beel?"

"I'll go, Gabrielle. In a moment."

HE WAS thinking, staring from the window, how strange it was. Those cemeteries out there—this shell-torn forest—Nature was doing her best to heal these wounded fields, hiding the deformities under moss and leafage, wiping out the scars with rain. Barbed wire and iron rusted and dissolved; cannon-wheels sank in the earth of their own weight; trenches shallowed into furrows; gunpits and undergrounds made burrows for the rabbit and the fox.

But the minds of men would not heal. Incredible to know that any day, now, the armies might be back; this very forest mined, uprooted, fire-blasted, blood-soaked again. The captains and the kings had gone, but their swords and cloaks merely passed to other men. Or had the Kaiser merely returned to Berlin with the tips whacked from his mustache, the withered arm lifted in the air, the eagles changed to a Swastika?

That bald-jawed man who shouted and made faces from the Palazzo di Venetia—hadn't the Romans heard that speech somewhere before? On the roof of the Kremlin the same old Czar—shaved, yes, and in a workman's blouse, but wielding the same iron fist?

Fascism, Communism — the words sounded different, but didn't the meanings, if any, translate into the familiar greeds of empire, the familiar lusts for racial power? Perhaps that clock had been keeping the correct time, striking back to 1916. Little wonder that the black-masked officer had laughed.

"Beel! *Maman* will be honking the horn."

He stared blankly at the raindrops spilling down the window.

"All right, Gabrielle. I'm coming."

Yes, and in a way Madame Landru was clairvoyant. The Battle of the Somme *was* still going on. It had never ended. The armies had only retired to gather recruits. Tomorrow or the day after there would be different generals named on the roadside plaques—Gamelin, Voroshilov, Goering. Two hundred thousand new names in those acres of little white crosses—names like Fielding and Tac and Putinov and Arnoldo, maybe his own.

"Beel! Please—"

"I—yes, yes; as soon as I get my hat."

"It is in your hand."

So it was. As well as the officer's cap with the maple leaf over the visor. The captain's cap had dropped off as they had carried him out to the police van to take him to Contalmaison with his squad. Bill Shepherd had picked it up; meant to follow. Then he had hunted the name in the cap-band, because . . .

BUT the name had been Enderby. *D. S. Enderby*. He had felt a great wave of relief—the maimed and broken-faced officer was not Hugh! And yet—? Admittedly these poor, unwanted reminders of the last War had been wearing such articles of uniform as they had been able to find in the hideaways of the forest. And his knowledge of the *château*. That kitbag in the tower!

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But Bill Shepherd refused to think about it. He had no right to know. You could not question the dying, and the dead were entitled to their secrets. The captain had said he was not Hugh Shepherd. And he wasn't.

"Beel! I wish you would come."

He smiled as she grasped his hand. Gabrielle. Funny, wasn't it? In at the start and standing by to the finish. The only straight character-part in the show. Spoke her lines and meant them. Like most of the people in this world, he hadn't been able to recognize the truth.

"Beel, *maman* will think something is wrong. Please come while she is still interested in the *château* and—"

"Your mother?" he stared vaguely. "Interested in the—"

"Chateau de Feu!" the girl said, frowning and smiling at the same time. "Beel, you won't listen to me. I have been talking to *maman* about it. She has been talking to your lawyer, and Monsieur Bertrand is anxious for you to hear. *Maman* wants to buy the *château*—"

He started, hearing only the last. "Your mother? Wants to buy the Château de Feu?"

"And the forest also. Please convince her, Beel. I so much want her to do it. *Maman* is very rich. From her second marriage to a Swiss. I did not approve her divorcing my father to marry a Swiss, but perhaps it will be nice, for the Swiss has left a great deal of money.

"My mother will not know what to do with it all. She would only lose it in silly investments. I want her to buy the *château* and give it to me. The *château* I would make into a fine veteran's hospital, and the forest would be a splendid grove for aged horses!"

He wanted to say something. You never could find a word that meant anything when you wanted one. Lord, if her mother did buy this place! Veteran's home, and a grove for grandfatherly horses! It would mean he'd be seeing the girl again, too!

He could only look down into her shining eyes and gulp, "Gabrielle—!"

BUT wait! Not too fast, Shepherd! This was too much like Plot 61-D, Ending 23! This thing wasn't happening in a fiction magazine. Nice curtain-line for a story, but stories never bothered with Tomorrow. Why put up a veteran's home and a retreat for tired horses as a target for Tomorrow's cannon? For his own part, he had something first to do.

He was going to write that book Hugh had wanted to see written. It wouldn't be a great book or a best seller or even a well-written book. If you called it *Whither Are We Going* or *Economics Toward Armageddon* or some title like that, it would have to sell for three dollars, and the only people who might read it would be people who knew about it anyway.

But he would write it as a mystery story—stick to the only technique he knew. Start it off with a murder, and then go back to that lawyer's office in Paris, and carry on out through all those moribund battlefields and World War cemeteries into the Forêt de Feu. All he had to do was tell the truth.

He would describe the forest and the grim *château*. He would introduce the characters as he had met them. He would try to convey the cold horrors he had experienced; tell the things he had imagined, the realities he had seen.

He would point the contrast between the cocky Marcel Tac of the fireside and the little man's hysteria at another kind of fire. Between Doctor Arnoldo's surgical detachment toward another's wounds and his intimate concern for his own. Between the agnosticism of Professor Putinov in a Soviet discourse, and his grasping for faith during emergency. Between Fielding's admiration for artistically ruined buildings, and his horror at the same artistry applied to man. Between Herr Kull's Germanic stoicism when it came to the death of his son, and his not so stoic acceptance of a similar demise for himself.

He would leave out no detail—Archambaud's horsy forelock or Madame Landru's parasite. He would describe the *mutilées* as he had briefly seen them—the *poilu's*

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shoulder-hooks and the Italian's punchinello hump—the one-eyed Chasseur—the halved Uhlan—the German with the peanut whistle throat—the masked captain's face.

Some readers would refuse belief, and others might criticize for morbidity and lack of good taste. When he told what Hugh had thought, a number would make charges of everything from pacifism to paganism.

But he would write what he had heard, felt, and seen. Expound no moral—let the reader, if any, draw his own conclusion.

A happy ending? He wondered about it, walking hand in hand with Gabrielle out to the waiting car.

Then he had the ending for his story. At the point where, driving back to Contalmaison, the sleek Rolls Royce took the road across the landscape of cemeteries—white crosses marching in the rain—and Lawyer Bertrand, at his side, gave an inadvertent start. Bertrand supplied the end.

"Shepherd," he said, his sandy voice low, "I forgot to tell you—"

"What?"

"That which brought me out here seeking you in doubled haste." The pale eyes flicked sideways to the girl and her mother engrossed in conversation. Then, in the manner of a magician producing a secret and evil missive, the lawyer drew from his pocket a folded newspaper. A last-night edition of the Paris *Soir*.

Bill Shepherd stared, tight-throated, at the headlines.

GERMANY INVADES POLAND! FRANCE AND ENGLAND SEND HITLER ULTIMATUM! NAZIS PLUNGING EUROPE INTO WAR!

The car swerved, passing the police van laden with misshapen bodies. Was Democracy to perish with them? Who would remember them now?

He would call his story, *The Forgotten of God*.

THE END

LOOKING AHEAD!

THE STARS SPELL DEATH

Can you read the message written in the night sky? . . . Twelve frightened people saw there a prophecy of peril for tomorrow; and yet they could not know whether their fate was controlled by the flaming symbols of the zodiac—or by Mr. Mystery. A Crime Club selection, this magnificent new novel is by

JONATHAN STAGGE

CAPTAIN JONAH

Not for us to deny that certain dark, questionable, and even violent procedures obtain in the South Seas—as, indeed, they do everywhere else. Appreciation of such goings-on, however, varies considerably with the nature of the rascals behind them; and so we are happy to present three men who make pastimes out of arson, thievery, and a general disregard for His Majesty's colonial law.

A fast-action complete novelet by

CRAWFORD SULLIVAN

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—OCTOBER 28TH

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Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

NO TIME for comedy today, folks. We have on hand so long and fascinating a letter that there is no room for lunacy in this department. So, probably with a good deal of relief, you may get started right away on a notable human-interest document. Here is how one person discovered ARGOSY, nearly half a century ago.

M. REID

Forty years ago I figured on writing you. Why I did not is a long forgotten reason.

My mother was traveling with four children of between the ages of six months and twelve years. Because our train was running an hour or more late, we missed a connection we should have made, and had to stay overnight at a certain Junction. All there was to the place was the depot and attached warehouse, two saloons and a general store.

The June night was hotter even than the plush train seats had been. We pushed the bed close as was safe against the single little unscreened window that was allotted each room. Then mother and I took turns at fanning the baby and the two other children, as these lay sweltering on the hot, hard mattress.

It took only a short time for us to find out one or the other must keep watch throughout the night. The weather was too dry for mosquitoes. But other night hunters crept out from door and window facings, as well as from hiding places in the wooden bedstead. We had to catch and slide a foot over them before they should bite the younger children. Which, of course, meant, in spite of the stifling heat, our letting the smelly kerosense lamp keep burning.

Mother thought it best for me to take the first stretch at watching; as she knew it would be hard for a child to keep awake in the later hours of the night.

Warning me to wake her as soon as I began to get drowsy, she threw herself down on the bed and soon was herself asleep.

I stared out of the window, what time my eyes were not alert for crawlers, without seeing anything but darkness, or hearing anything more than the chirp of night insects out there!

I began to nod. That would never do. I salvaged some old papers, one sheet happily possessed of a puzzle, along with some discarded masculine underwear, from the washstand drawers. Then I used the single chair in the room as a ladder for the exploration of the closet's one high shelf. My treasure trove was an ancient brakeman's cap, half a dozen railroad union monthlies and the first ARGOSIES I had ever handled. To the best of my recollection the magazines were of the year before, far enough back that I was unable to later find anyone who still had the copy or copies I so wanted.

Your stories now are no finer than those in the dusty, greasy torn old ARGOSIES that enthralled me that awful night. Wake mother? Indeed not. I was glad the lamp had been newly filled and lasted till mother's watch said it was time to warn the rest of the family that our train would soon be along.

Either the tale whose title I still remember, at least approximately, was a serial or part of it was torn away. "John of Strathmore" was quite obviously of noble lineage, though he did not himself seem to have ever suspected the truth about his English parents who became victims of upsets at the time of the French Revolution. My acquaintance with him went no further than his misfortunates as the stable boy slave of a brutal innkeeper.

The heroine of the romance was Esmee, last name forgotten, rich and high-born ward of a villainous uncle who had just married her to the stable boy, to punish her for daring to resist matrimony with a scoundrel of her uncle's choice.

The next pages, or installments of the tale would, it was evident, have restored John to his rightful estate. I still would like to know just how, when and by whom.

There is nothing more tantalizing than to have the end of a fascinating story left untold, however sure you are as to what it must be. And here I've had mental trails left with question marks for considerably more than just forty years. You sometimes backtrack. Why not resurrect "John of Strathmore", or thereabouts and let a long-time faithful reader put R. I. P. on a haunting memory?

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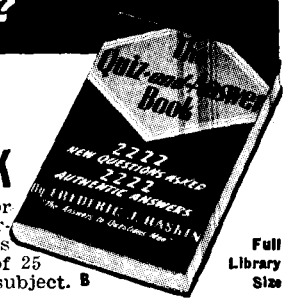

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